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VOL. 1, NO. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION 1950 EDITION

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Between these covers is a liberal portion of the excitement and romance of the Old West, of the day when a man with a horse between his knees and a gun on his hip was a king in his own right, a king who bowed to no man.

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—THE EDITOR

Into feud-torn Alamita Basin rides a fighting lawman, grimly determined to stop the bullet-blasting range war that rages there unchecked!

The TEXAS RANGERS

A Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

The Lone Wolf

SUNSET over the Sienegas.

A mass of scarlets and golds and purples and trembling amethysts flooded the western sky, as if a drunken god were twirling a rainbow-riata over the jagged peaks that spired up to rip the color-drenched clouds to bloody streamers.

Across the silver river, now darkly mysterious and powdered with stars, drifted a mournful wind that sobbed its way north.

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Playing a Lone Hand, Jim Rance Calls the

A silent troop of shadows crossed the river. There was a sharp clicking on the stones of the bank; then the steady drum of hoofs hurrying on the heels of the wind.

Old Chris Barker had taken up land a few miles north of the river, built a ranchhouse, and now lived there with his daughter. Three or four cowboys occupied his bunkhouse. Old Chris owned some pretty nice cattle. He also raised quite a bit of alfalfa.

The Barker ranchhouse was a lonely place, crouched at the foot of a low hill.

That hill threw a black moonshadow across ranchhouse and barns and bunkhouse. Only the faint glimmer of the stars outlined those other shadows that drifted up from the south. Old Chris, his daughter, and his cowboys slept soundly.

Suddenly, spurts of flame lanced the darkness. Fiendish yells soared up from the galloping shadows. The roar of gunfire smashed the silence with a veritable drumroll of sound. Rifle butts thudded against the ranchhouse door.

The cowboys, half-dressed, bewildered, dashed from the bunkhouse, guns in hand. A withering blast of rifle fire stretched two of them on the ground before they could fire a shot. The others crouched low, guns blazing.

They emptied two saddles. Then they died.

Old Chris clawed for his gun as the dark-faced killers surged into the house. He was instantly shot, his right arm was smashed and his brains were spattered against the wall. Ten minutes later a herd of bellowing cattle lumbered southward, the glow of the burning ranch buildings reddening their backs.

Drifting back toward the desolate scene of murder and destruction, a woman's terror-packed scream faded away in the darkness . . .

THERE was anger, and animated discussion, at Ranger headquarters. The company captain, lean, tall, gray of eye and tight of mouth, listened to Corporal Akens deliver his report.

"Conditions are mighty bad over there, sir," said Akens. "That raid on the Barker ranch two nights back was about the worst, but there's been plenty more. It's impossible to keep a fence up anywhere in the district. The Cullum pasture has been cut, all the way around, fifty times in the past five months. Two Grangers—that's what the big cattlemen call them small ranchers and alfalfa growers—have been shot at through their windows and another one got a slug between his shoulders as he was riding along the road."

"Local authorities doing anything?" asked the captain.

Aken shrugged his big shoulders. "Sheriff is a salty specimen, all right," he said, "and I hear tell he's got political influence that stretches clear to Austin; but he doesn't seem to make any headway against those outlaws. My opinion is that he doesn't want to make headway. And anyway, sir, you know there isn't any law west of the Pecos."

"There's going to be," said the rock-faced captain, grimly. "There's going to be—Ranger law!"

Corporal Akens answered, "Yes, sir," in respectful tones. The Ranger captain rubbed his chin in perplexity. "Were you able to find out who's behind all this, Corporal?" he asked. "Whether it's the big cattlemen who want to tear down the fences and keep the open range?"

"No, sir," Akens said. "Most of the folks out thataway figure it's the cattle barons but I don't think so. It's all too merciless, too vicious,

to be the work of the big cattlemen. These fellers kill even when it isn't necessary—kill merely for the sake of killing."

"If it's not the big fellows, who do you believe is responsible?"

The corporal shrugged. "I don't know, sir. It'll need some sort of a detective to find that out—somebody who can handle straight Ranger work as well."

The captain frowned. "Thank you. That will be all, Corporal."

JIM RANCE

After the Ranger non-com had saluted and withdrawn, the captain turned to his lieutenant and said: "We'll have to send somebody out there who isn't known in that district. Who'll it be?"

Lieutenant Bayles, gaunt and taciturn, spoke for the first time: "How about Ranger Jim Rance? He likes to play a single-handed game."

The captain's eyebrows went up. "You mean that stony faced fellow who joined at San Antonio? The one from Brooks' company?"

"Sure. He's got brains and sand, or I'm badly mistaken. He's only been around here a month and the chances are nobody in Alamita Basin knows he's with the Rangers. Carney says that when he's with the troop he's just another good Ranger, but when he's off alone he's a terror."

"Sounds good," the captain admitted. He turned to a clerk. "Hunt up that new feller, Rance, and bring him here," he ordered.

THE clerk returned five minutes later. "On his way, sir," he reported.

When Jim Rance walked into his captain's presence and saluted, the officer's eyes sparkled with approval as he noted the tall form, the lean, bronzed face with its somewhat wide, good-humored mouth, and level gray-green eyes. Rance's hair was crisp and black, his forehead broad and surprisingly white above where the band of his broad-brimmed hat shaded it from the sun. His hands were slim, muscular and competent. He was broad of shoulder, lean of waist and hips.

"Special work for you, Rance," the captain said.

"Yes, sir." Jim Rance's voice was soft and easy, and deceptively mild

In terse sentences the captain outlined the situation. "Those are your orders," he concluded. "How you execute them is your own business."

"Yes, sir."

Rance asked no questions. He saluted, turned and walked out, closing the door softly behind him. The captain grunted.

A half hour later Jim Rance rode west, mounted on a splendid sorrel gelding. A Winchester snuggled in the saddle boot. Two heavy Colts sagged in carefully worked and oiled hand-made holsters. Behind his cantle was his well-filled warbag. He lounged easily in the saddle and his green eyes were sunny. He felt pleased and happy.

More than a thousand miles away,

In a mahogany office high above the clang and roar of New York's busy streets, three men sat around a table on which was spread a large map. They talked in low voices—choppy fragments of speech that were fraught with meaning. Their hands were soft, but their faces were hard, their eyes cold and calculating. Such were the faces and eyes of the old robber barons who looked out from their grim castle keeps, and levied ruthless tribute from all who used the lonely roads.

One read from a telegram come that day from far off Texas. The message was in code. "That Ranger left today," he deciphered. "He didn't learn anything. Work going on. Will get results. D."

One of the listeners rumbled words from the corner of his mouth: "He'd better. We're paying him enough."

"He will," said the man at the head of the table, a hatchet-faced individual with a tight mouth. "Gentlemen, there are millions in this business, and we are going to collect them!"

"It's a pity we can't go ahead and buy or lease that land and be done with it," said the first speaker.

The hatchet-faced man shook his head. "We can't take the chance," he replied. "In the first place, there is nothing dependable about the titles to that land. Open range—nesters—if ever it came to a court contest we wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Some of the big owners are trying to obtain clear titles, but as yet they have not succeeded. The rest rely on worthless old Spanish grants.

"Secondly, news travels fast in that country. Buy or lease one parcel and immediately the word gets about that outside capital is interested. Why? Up goes the price and, what is worse, people get suspicious. Once let them get suspicious and start looking around and investigating and somebody will stumble onto the reason why we want the land. No, let our worthy sheriff keep working. Things will become so unpleasant there that people will start moving out. Once the Basin is cleared, we can start acquisition and the rest is easy. Then we proceed to collect. Millions, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER II

Friends and Enemies

DUSK was pouring the great cup brimful of shadows when Jim Rance reached the eastern rim of the Alamita Basin. Far away to the southwest he could see a faint cluster of lights that was the town of Alamita. Before him stretched a long slope dotted with woods and thickets among which the trail wound like a bad-tempered snake through a cactus patch. Jim tightened his belt a notch.

His keen ears had caught the sound of frantic hoofs beating up the wriggly trail. His eyes narrowed a trifle and he loosened the right-hand Colt in its sheath.

"Just in case," he murmured. "Never can tell in this country."

On came the beating hoofs. Jim noted an irregularity in their tempo.

"Horse is about all in," he deduced. "There he is, and he's lucky if he makes it to the top of the rise."

The horse did not. Jim saw the laboring animal loom darkly gigantic in the dusk, watched him stumble drunkenly to within fifty feet of where Rance himself sat his own mount in the black shadow of a thicket.

Down went the exhausted cayuse, hurling the rider over its head. The horse struggled to its feet almost instantly and stood with legs wide-spread and head hanging. The rider lay still.

Jim spoke to the sorrel and rode out of the shadow. A few yards from the prostrate man he swung lithely to the ground and walked slowly toward him. His quick eye caught

a shifting glint of metal. He covered the remaining ten feet like a charging wolf. His boot toe caught the fallen man's wrist and sent the gun spinning from his hand. Then the Ranger's iron grip fastened on his collar and jerked him erect. A voice cold as frostcoated steel bit at the stranger, the muzzle of a big Colt jammed against his ribs.

"You figure that you've lived too long, feller?" asked the Ranger.

"D-don't shoot!" panted the other. "I wasn't going to hurt you. I was just going to try and get your horse!"

"Horse stealing is looked on about the same as killing a man in this country," said Rance.

"I know it is," said the other, "but I'm done for anyhow. That bunch following me will string me up quick as they catch me."

"Huh? What have you been doin'?" Jim peered at the other man through the dusk and was able to make out a weakly vicious face with shifty eyes. "What have you been doing to put those fellers on the prod?" he repeated. "Better talk fast, I hear horses."

The other shivered in the Ranger's grasp and stuttered a reply. "I—I been cutting fence!"

Jim tightened his grip on the fellow's collar, then relaxed it. An idea had darted through his mind. For several seconds he thought furiously. He let go of the prisoner's collar altogether.

"Listen," he said. "I don't believe in a feller being strung up for cutting a little wire. I'm going to help you out. Take this bridle and lead my horse back into that thicket up there. Get him clear out of sight and hold his nose if he starts to whinny. Don't you make any noise or try to run for it. Just keep quiet and lay low. I'll take care of those fellows coming up the trail."

Stuttering incoherent thanks, the wire-cutter obeyed. Jim waited until he had vanished. He could hear the fast beat of the posse's hoofs surging up the dark trail. He listened an instant longer and drew his gun. Then he let out a piercing yell.

A moment later he fired three shots into the air.

"You murdering drygulcher!" he roared. Then he raked himself smartly across the forehead with the sight on the muzzle of the Colt, leaving a red welt and a trickle of blood.

Shouts sounded down the trail, and a thunder of hoofs. A shadowy group of riders surged around the bend. When the posse hoof-slid to a halt beside Jim, they found him on hands and knees, clutching the powder-fouled Colt, shaking his bloody head dazedly from side to side.

MEN dropped to the ground. Rough hands seized the Ranger and jerked him to his feet. Fierce eyes glared at him through the gathering dark.

"Shucks!" swore a voice bitterly, "this isn't him!"

"Of course it isn't, you fool!" exclaimed another voice. "Don't you see what happened? That sidewinder met this feller, knocked him on the head and took his horse. There's the one he rode standing over there all spraddled out and winded."

There was a chorus of curses. A tall man shouldered to the front and addressed Jim. "What happened to you, stranger?"

"Darned if I'm sure," Jim replied, passing a hand across his bloody forehead. "Some cuss came riding lickety-split up the trail on a near dead hoss. I pulled to one side to let him pass and he walloped me over the head with a gun or something and knocked me out of the saddle. A minute later he went riding away. Soon as I stopped seeing stars I threw some lead after him, but he went over the top up there. I guess I didn't wing him."

"He took your horse?" said a posseman.

Jim swore with whole-hearted

fervor. "What else did he do?" he demanded.

"Plenty!" snapped the posseman. "Swing it, you leather-pounders!" he barked to his followers. "After that skunk!"

Bridles jingling, hoofs thundering, the posse swept over the brow of the hill, leaving Jim Rance standing alone in the dust of the trail, a grin twitching at the corners of his firm mouth.

"All right, come out of it," he called to the hidden wire-cutter.

The fellow came, shuffling, leading the sorrel. "I'm sure obliged to you, stranger," he mouthed. "I thought I was fruit for a cottonwood tree."

"You're liable to be yet, if them fellers catch you around here," Jim told him grimly. "Best thing you can do is fork your bronc—he's able to travel easy now—and dust out of here. Cut off through the brush."

"I'll do it," replied the weasel faced man. "Well, I reckon we understand each other."

"Guess we do." Jim nodded, but his meaning was other than the interpretation the wire-cutter placed upon the remark.

"I'll see you in town maybe," said the wire-cutter as he gathered up his reins. "Perhaps you might like to meet some of the boys?"

"Uh-huh," Jim told him. "There ought to be some pickings in this section for a feller who can use his head."

"There is," the wire-cutter assured him. "Well, so long."

The tired horse's hoofs padded away through the brush. Jim mounted the sorrel and rode thoughtfully toward the distant town of Alamita.

"That little skunk'll turn up sooner or later," he mused. "Through him I'll get in touch with who's kickin' up all the row over here. It's worth taking the chance."

It was well past midnight when the Ranger, tired, sleepy and hungry, reached the town. Alamita proved to be a straggle of shacks, cabins, saloons and a few stores. Here and there were more pretentious dwellings, mostly built of 'dobe, or sun-dried brick, and plastered a creamy white. Jim found a stable for his horse and headed into a saloon.

A few cowboys and a miner or two lounged against the bar, behind which a sleepy-eyed drink juggler presided. There was a lunch counter and a drowsing Mexican cook.

Jim had a drink and ordered ham and eggs, a double portion, which he proceeded to eat. Later, feeling much more contented, he sauntered back to the bar and asked a question.

"Walk north along this street and turn the first corner," replied the barkeep. "That'll bring you up against the Grand Imperial Hotel. She's two stories high and has a lean-to. Barrelshape Burks runs her. He's got warts and no morals, but he keeps the diggin's clean. He'll put yuh up, day, week or month. Don't nobody calculate on livin' any longer than that in this dad-blamed bullet-pumping section of purgatory of late, so I don't reckon Barrelshape has special rates for any more than a month."

AS JIM leaned on the bar and sipped his drink, a man came through the swinging doors and glanced keenly around the room. He was a big man, tall as the tall Ranger, and heavier. He was handsome in a black-eyed, swarthy, flashing way. His jaw was strong, his mouth was a little too red of lip and there was a cruel twist at the corners. He was dressed in black from wide Stetson to polished boots. On the left breast of his black silk shirt was a silver star.

He nodded shortly to the barkeep and the cowboys, his gaze rested on Jim and he strode to the bar.

"Howdy," he greeted the Ranger. His voice was deep and harsh.

"Fair to middling," acknowledged Jim.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

Jim whirled and caught a glimpse of two men who had just ridden out of the woods behind him (CHAP. IV)

"You got good eyes," admitted Jim.

The other flushed slightly, but there was nothing in either words or tone of voice at which he could very well take offense. He beckoned the bartender.

"Fill 'em up," he ordered. "This feller's having a drink on me."

Jim Rance's voice clipped at the bartender.

"This feller is not!"

The bartender halted with a bottle held aloft in his right hand. His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. The swarthy man's face turned fiery red, his eyes blazed.

"Wh-what the devil!" he mouthed.

THE Ranger's bleak face was within inches of his own, eyes cold as snow-dusted ice chilled his black glare.

A voice soft and drawling but dripping contempt cut through the sheriff's indignant roar.

"Feller, I don't drink with no man what's hiding behind a tin dishpan!"

The other's head involuntarily rose to the star on his breast. He stuttered in his rage.

"You—you—listen! I'm sheriff of this county!"

"So what?"

The rage abruptly burned out of the sheriff's eyes. A calculating gleam that was far more menacing took its place. His voice became level.

"Just this—I'm runnin' things around these diggings, and when I ask questions I expect answers."

Jim Rance nodded thoughtfully. "Bet you're better at questions than getting answers," he remarked. "Listen, you!" his voice suddenly blazed. "I'm attending to my own business and plumb peaceful. Whenever you catch me busting some laws, come around as sheriff. So long as you don't, I figure you as just another trouble-hunting hombre. That's what I got you figured right now, and if you don't like my way of telling you, fill your hand!"

He stepped back from the bar, slim hands hanging loosely by his sides, fingers slightly curved.

The sheriff's hand was on the butt of the heavy Smith and Wesson sagging at his right hip. Every muscle of his body was tense and rigid. For an instant Jim thought he was going to draw.

Then the hand dropped. The sheriff nodded.

"There's somethin' in what you said," he replied. "I'm lookin' for trouble that doesn't get me anything. So long as you don't break the law or—run up against me, we won't have trouble. But if you do—look out!"

He turned on his heel and left the saloon.

The bartender let out a low whistle. "Well," he said, "that's the first time I ever saw Bart Dole back down."

Jim Rance shook his head. "Feller," he said, "you don't see things right. That jigger don't back down from nobody. He just decides what suits him best to do, and does it."

BARRELSHAPE BURKS, who weighed part of a ton and had a voice like a tail-pinched rat, was drowsing in a chair when Jim entered the office of the Grand Imperial Hotel.

"Sure you can get a room," he squeaked. "Go right up them stairs and second door on the left. Me, I don't do much stairclimbing; it's blamed hard on the stairs!"

Jim found the little room clean and comfortable. He undressed, placed his holstered guns handy and thought a bit before finally going to sleep.

"Not so bad for a beginnin'," he mused. "That sheriff's a salty hombre, all right, and he's got brains and a temper. Maybe if that's worked on sufficiently he'll lose it and show his hand. Then I'll know if Corporal Akens was right when he figured that the sheriff was crooked."

CHAPTER III

Gun Fighters

JIM found Barrelshape Burks squeaking about the office when he went downstairs the next morning.

"Sleep well?" asked Barrelshape.

"Sure," Jim told him. "Like a bear in a butter tub. Thought I heard shooting along some time during the night, though."

"You did," said Barrelshape. "That was over to Sam Sullivan's Black Ace Saloon. Bunch of salty fellers drifted in and started a ruckus. Sam's lookout took it up and got perforated. Job's vacant now and no takers. All the nine-minute eggs in this neck o' the woods congregate in the Black Ace. Feller what tries to keep order in that joint is friends with the undertaker the minute he starts working."

Jim ate his breakfast at a nearby restaurant. His face was thoughtful as he smoked a cigarette. He stood up, finally, left the place, and directed his steps toward the Black Ace Saloon.

The Black Ace was a big place, altogether too big for the ramshackle town to support, it would seem. A moment's reflection, however, reminded Jim that Alamita was headquarters and general gathering place for the entire Basin. Doubtless on the days that the big ranches paid their hands, the town boomed. Several small mines in the neighborhood also added their quota of spenders.

Evidence of the carnage of the night before was still evident in the Black Ace. A hanging lamp with a shattered chimney swung drunkenly by a single chain. The wreckage of a splintered table was piled in one corner. A large mirror over the back bar had been knocked to fragments by a stray bullet. Sam Sullivan, the proprietor, was swearing over the broken mirror when Jim entered.

Sullivan was a big man with a tight mouth, cold gray eyes and a head as innocent of hair as a billiard ball. He had once been a tough hombre in a hand-to-hand row, but of late years had run largely to stomach. His wind was bad and he puffed when he moved.

Jim stood for a while, sipping his drink. He was standing at one end of the long bar. His greenish eyes wandered over the array of bottles on the back bar.

"What's in that black bottle down there?" he asked Sullivan, gesturing toward the far end of the back bar. "The one with the red label."

Sullivan squinted in the direction of the bottle in question. "That tall one? That's prime liquor, feller. Want a snort? All right, wait'll I locate a opener." He fumbled under the bar.

"I'll open it," said Jim. His right hand sliced to his side. A long-barreled Colt slid from its sheath, and he fired.

Sullivan jumped two feet. The bartender howled, and dived for cover. The squat bottle at the far end of the bar rocked and teetered. Where the sealed cork had been was a jagged splintering of broken glass.

"She's open," remarked Jim, holstering his gun.

Sullivan let out a roar. "What did you mean by that?"

Jim Rance's soft drawl broke in on his indignant howl. "Didn't I understand you were looking for a man who could shoot?"

Sullivan's jaw sagged. For a moment his mouth hung open, then it clamped shut like a bear trap. His eyes, shrewd, calculating, looked the tall, broad-shouldered Ranger over from head to foot.

"I also need one who isn't scared," he grunted.

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "Feller who says he isn't afraid of anything is talking foolish," he remarked. "He can't tell whether he's going to be afraid of a thing till he

runs up against it."

Sullivan, a shrewd judge of human nature from his many years in the liquor business, nodded.

"That's talkin' sense," he admitted. "A man who's always spouting about how salty he is usually is trying to cover up his yaller streak. I'll take a chance on you. When can you start to work?"

JIM RANCE took the job of lookout and floor man in the toughest saloon that Alamita boasted. His duties were to see that no crooked work went on at the gambling games, to keep something like order on the dance floor and to stop trouble before it started. He quickly learned that the Black Ace bore an unsavory reputation and that Sam Sullivan's was little better. Barrelshape Burks let out a squeal of dismay when Jim told him about the new job.

"You're going to start paying in advance right now!" declared Barrelshape. "I'm not taking chances on any jigger who works in that joint. All the sidewinders from the Sulphur Hills drop in there to raise the roof and shove chunks under the corner. Decent folks don't approve of the place. Feller, I like you, but you sure have got into bad company."

Jim thought so, too, but was not dismayed at the prospect. In fact, it was right in line with the character he had assumed. Only a tough gunman with little to lose and loose morals would take the job, according to the opinion of residents of Alamita Basin. Which suited the Ranger exactly.

He also quickly learned that his reputation was already not of the best among the law-abiding. The second evening he worked for Sullivan, a lean, taciturn individual entered the saloon, bought a drink and, glancing up, looked the new floor man squarely in the face.

Jim saw a cold glint sparkle in the man's blue eyes and a tightening of the firm jaw. He also saw the instinctive lowering of a hand toward a sagging holster. His own slim fingers hooked casually over his double cartridge belts.

The other man continued to stare with hostility in his direction. Jim stared back, impassively. He had recognized the leader of the posse that chased the wire-cutter. The posseman abruptly left the bar and walked over to the tall floor man. Looking Jim squarely in the eye, he spoke in low tones that did not carry three feet.

"It was a plumb nice play, feller," he said. "You fooled us proper and let that hydrophobia skunk get away. I got to give you credit, but I want you to know I'm on to you. I've got your brand read right."

Jim Rance drawled a single contemptuous word. "Well?"

The other man's eyes glinted, but he did not raise his voice or lose his temper.

"Just this," he replied. "There's a decent element in this Basin that is tired of criminals. We've stood about all we're going to from your kind and you're about due for fumigating. There's plenty of roses and plenty of trees hereabouts, and plenty of straight-thinking men ready to use both when the time comes. You needn't hang onto your belt that way," he went on. "I'm not going to try conclusions with you personally. I know a quick-draw man when I see one and know I wouldn't have a chance. But what I told you is straight, and don't forgit it!"

He turned his back on the Ranger and left the saloon.

Jim gazed after him, a sunny light in his green eyes. "Real!" he said softly under his breath. "Real, and straight, and square-shooting. That's the kind whoever is back of all this devilishness is tryin' to run out of the Basin. That's the kind of fellers who make a country worth living in. That's the kind of folks it's worth taking a chance or two to help."

BEFORE the night was over, Jim had another visitor. A rat-faced fellow dressed in nondescript cowboy clothes sidled through the swinging doors along toward morning. He was followed by two other shifty-eyed individuals with tied-down holsters. The three grouped themselves at one end of the bar and talked together in low tones. Finally Rat-face sauntered over to where the Ranger stood near the roulette wheel.

"Remember me, pardner?" he asked. Jim nodded. The other man went on, barely audible words seeping from the corner of his mouth. "You sure did me a good turn the other night, and I told you I wouldn't forget it. I've been telling my pals over there about you and they figure you're a right sort. You're working here, aren't you?"

Again Jim nodded. He was curious as to what the wire-cutter had on his mind but preferred not to let the fellow know it. The other went on in the same mumbling tones.

"There's a little something in the wind that might interest you," he said. "It's a little job that's to be done. Good pay and no questions asked. Would you like to talk to the boss? We sort of need a cool hand like you."

For the third time Jim nodded. The other man grinned evilly. "You don't do much gabbing, do you? Well, if you want to hear about this proposition, drop over to Garcia's when this joint closes. I see Sam's puttin' up the shutters already. No business here just before payday at the mines and ranches."

A few moments later, the unsavory trio left the saloon. Jim asked the bartender just one casual question. The drink juggler's reply was profane.

"Garcia's? That's a buzzard roost over in the Mexican quarter. You can get anything there from bum mescal and *tequila* to lice and lead poisoning. Who's been talking to you about Garcia's?"

Rance slithered over the rocky lip of the gorge and plunged to the water below (CHAP. VIII)

CHAPTER IV

Outlaw Guns

AFTER a walk along a dark, crooked street, where slovenly shacks shouldered against squat 'dobe huts, Jim Rance found Garcia's saloon. It was a forbidding one-storied 'dobe that sprawled near the outskirts of the town. It was nearly as large as the Black Ace, but while Sullivan kept his place spick and span so far as outward dirt was concerned, here there was little pretense at cleanliness.

The big room was poorly lighted, with tables in shadowy corners. Guitars thrummed softly and dark-haired senoritas with calculating eyes danced with gaily costumed Mexicans or sinewy men in cowboy dress. The general air of the place was tense, and sinister.

Jim sauntered to the long bar and ordered *tequila*. As he sipped the fiery stuff, a chair scraped away from a table in one of the shadowy corners and the rat-faced wire-cutter shuffled across the room.

"Come on over and meet the boys," he invited. "The boss is there too. He wants to talk to you."

Jim finished his drink and followed the other man across the room. He sat down in a vacant chair and regarded the other occupants of the table. Two he recognized as the wire-cutter's companions in the Black Ace. The third man was a big Mexican with snapping black eyes and a thin mouth partially hidden beneath a heavy black mustache. He nodded to Jim and addressed him in good English with very little accent.

"Squinty's been telling me about you," he said, "and how you saved him from getting his neck stretched by those cowboys."

Jim nodded. "Uh-huh, and who are you?"

The other seemed slightly taken aback at the abrupt question. He hesitated an instant and then answered:

"Me? I'm Miguel Garcia."

"Huh? You run this place?"

"Yes," replied Garcia. "This is my cantina. How you like it?"

"Not bad," Jim admitted. "But if you'd hire a couple of swampers and turn 'em loose in here with a lot of soap and water, she'd be sort of improved."

A dark flush tinged Garcia's swarthy cheek and there was an unpleasant glitter in his black eyes. "The place she suits me, and the people who come here," he said.

"Fair enough," Jim admitted. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Squinty sort of likes you," replied Garcia. "He's got a notion you'd be a good man to sign up with our outfit. I got a little proposition to make you, if you're interested."

Garcia glanced around the shadowy room and leaned closer. "There's some little jobs of work to be done in this Basin," he said; "why and who for don't matter. If you sign on with us, you'll be working for me and taking orders from me. Handle things right and there'll be mighty good pay in it for you. If you don't handle 'em right, there's liable to be the loose end of a rope or the hot end of a bullet.

"Squinty nearly bungled his job the other night, and you saw what would have happened to him if you hadn't come along at just the right time. You willing to take a chance?"

"I've been taking chances purty regular for quite a spell now," Jim commented.

Garcia nodded. "All right," he said, "we'll take you on." The Mexican went on smoothly: "The little job in question deals with the Bar C Ranch. It is a small, fenced outfit about ten miles to the south of here. A man by the name of Tom Carney owns it. He has made trouble for our men and must be taught a lesson. Now pay attention!"

For some minutes Garcia talked

earnestly. Jim Rance listened, nodding from time to time, his green eyes narrowing slightly as Garcia unfolded his plan.

"You get the idea, don't you?" Garcia concluded. "Carney knows most of our boys and if one of them goes snooping around the Bar C, he's liable to get caught. You're a stranger hereabouts and anybody with half an eye can see you're a cowboy. There's lots of wandering cowpunchers riding across this range, heading for New Mexico or Arizona, and if Carney does spot you he won't think anything about it.

"Fact is, the best thing you can do is ride right up to the Bar C ranchhouse and ask for food or something. That'll give you the best chance in the world to look the ground over. Maybe you could get friendly with him and persuade him to spend a night in town with you. That'd be aces high."

JIM left Garcia's saloon with a new conception of the lengths to which the unknown troublemakers in Alamita Basin would go. He was also more puzzled than ever.

"Why in tarnation would anybody go to all this trouble to clean folks off of a range, folks who aren't especially important so far as I can see?" he demanded of the pale glory of the dawn. "Certainly it's a good range, but there's plenty of good range in Texas. There's no use for anybody to tell me that the big ranch owners are back of this. It's somethin' deeper than that—but what?

"If this was gold country, I'd say somebody'd hit on something big, in the way of a ledge or placer deposit. But it isn't. All the gold in this section is back in the Sulphur Hills, and that propped-up hunk of badlands is anybody's for the taking!"

Still puzzled, he went to bed and slept until noon. Barrelshape's warning squeak awakened him. After eating a hearty breakfast, he saddled his big sorrel and rode south.

Garcia's directions had been precise, and Jim experienced little difficulty following the trail that led to the Bar C. He was yet several miles distant and passing over rolling open range when he heard a sharp crackling, like the breaking of a bundle of sticks one by one.

"Sounds like gunfire," he told the sorrel, and twitched the reins.

The golden horse quickened his pace. They topped a low rise, and a wide valley, through which a little river flowed like a ribbon of silver, stretched before them. Halfway down the gentle slope a trail ran and along this trail, a rising and falling black smudge in the distance, scurried a single rider.

Jim watched the approaching horseman curiously, and as he watched, a group of riders careened around a distant bend and straightened out in the wake of the first. Little puffs of whitish smoke mushroomed up from their midst and again Jim caught that snapping, crackling sound, growing louder with each stride of the racing horses.

"Lucky for that jigger in front those fellers haven't long guns," he mused as he urged the sorrel slowly down the slope. "Sixes aren't much good at that distance, but a rifle would knock him off pronto."

The pressure of his own heavy Winchester in the saddleboot beneath his knee was comforting. He leaned over and loosened the rifle in its leather sheath. On came the lone rider, growing larger and larger, and on came the pursuers. A dozen paces from the trail, and partially screened by a mesquite clump, Jim pulled up and watched the chase.

"He's going to make it," mused Jim. "Another two minutes and he'll be past me and in that timber stand. He oughtn't to have any trouble giving 'em the slip in that growth. Wonder what it is all about, anyhow."

He peered at the approaching

rider, now so close that his features were plainly discernible.

"Sort of young looking," mused the Ranger. "Wouldn't figure him for a *mucho malo hombre*. This is getting interesting. I—good gosh—he's down!"

Almost opposite the Ranger, the speeding horse stumbled, tripped, and went end over end, casting his rider from the saddle like a stone from a sling. The man struck heavily on the sandy trail, rolled over and lay still. Thin whoops of exultation arose from the distant pursuers. Still shooting and yelling, they thundered down the trail.

Jim Rance's green eyes narrowed slightly, his lean jaw tightened. "That isn't a square shake—shooting at a man when he's on the ground," he muttered, gathering up his reins.

An instant later he rode from behind the mesquite, reached the trail and dismounted, sliding the rifle from the boot as he did so, and fired.

SMOKE wisped from the muzzle of the Winchester; a bullet yelled over the heads of the pursuers. The long gun cracked again and that bullet came closer. They began to pull up, still blazing away with their six-shooters. Some of the slugs whistled past Jim too close for comfort.

Eyes glinting behind the rifle sights, he got down to business. A hat was lifted from a rider's head. Another rider screeched as a rifle bullet creased his side. Still another had his Colt spun from his hand and lost part of a finger in the bargain. That was enough. The pursuers whirled their horses and rode back some distance. There they pulled up and huddled together, arguing with many gestures. Jim grinned thinly and lowered the rifle.

"Look out, feller!"

The voice came from behind Jim. He whirled, slewing sideward and down in the same movement. The roar of a six-gun echoed, the bullet screeching through space scant inches distant. Jim caught a glimpse of two men who had just ridden out of the woods behind him. A Colt smoked in the hand of one.

Up came the Winchester, roaring the instant it reached Jim's shoulder. The Colt took unto itself wings and went spinning into the brush. The man who had held it gripped his pain-burned arm and yelled a curse. The other man froze with a hand on his gun butt.

The Ranger cast a fleeting glance over his shoulder, saw that the distant group was not riding closer, and walked toward the pair. He recognized Sheriff Bart Dole. The other man, the one who had lost his Colt, was a big gray-haired individual with a hard face and angry blue eyes. He looked like a cold proposition, but his face, Jim decided, was not bad.

"What do you mean by throwing lead at my riders!" he bellowed.

Jim answered him with cold anger: "Your riders? I might've figured they belonged to the kind of cowardly scallawags who would shoot a man in the back! Drop your hand away from your belt, Sheriff, before something happens to it!"

The big man roared louder than ever. "I didn't try to shoot you in the back! I just wanted to make you turn around and see you were covered!"

"Well, I turned around, didn't I?"

A sudden twinkle sparked in the big man's blue eyes, and with it a look of grudging admiration. A wry grin twisted the corners of his mouth.

"You sure did!" he admitted, still rubbing his tingling arm. The twinkle died abruptly and he stopped grinning.

"What are you doing on my range?" he demanded, his narrowed eyes studying the tall Ranger.

"Your range, too, eh?" commented Jim. "What else do you own around here?"

The big man mouthed incoherent words. The sheriff's harsh voice broke in. "Mr. Damrock owns plenty of cows around here, too. That's why he's particular who rides over his range."

The implication was plain and did not tend to improve Jim Rance's temper. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder and saw that the distant group was riding closer. He turned his attention to Damrock.

"Since you lay claim to those hombres back there, suppose you let out a yelp and tell 'em not to come any closer," he suggested. "I won't be over responsible for your safety if they happen to get in six-gun range. Stray slug might puncture you or the sheriff."

THE hammer of the Winchester double-clicked to full cock as he spoke. Damrock took the hint.

"Get back to the house, boys!" he roared. "Phelps, you wait for me in the office."

A man who Jim deduced was Phelps, and doubtless foreman of the spread, shouted a reply and the group rode off. Jim addressed Damrock and the sheriff.

"Have you gents got proof that that feller sitting on the ground ever rustled any stock off this range?" he asked.

"No," growled Damrock, "but all small ranchers are rustlers."

"You saying so don't make it so," Jim replied. "And, Sheriff, you better rake up some proof before you go making big medicine. Loose talking isn't always healthy."

Sheriff Dole flushed, but he held his temper. "I warned you the other night," he said evenly. "I'm warnin' you again now. Don't get your rope tangled if you don't want it cut short."

"You're pretty near as good at warnings as you are at questions, aren't you?" remarked the Ranger. "Well, come around when you got some more to spill. Meanwhile I don't want to detain you gents, since you've finished your business around here. I won't be taking any of your range with me when I leave, Damrock."

Damrock glared at Jim, and snorted under his mustache. He barked at the young rider, who had stood up and was brushing the dust from his clothes.

"You have been warned too, Carney," he told him. "Warned plenty! You better stay off my range."

The young rider spoke the first words he had uttered since his shouted warning to Jim.

"You don't own this land," he replied sturdily. "It's open range and you have no title to it. When my cattle stray, I'm coming looking for them, especially when your men cut my fence."

Damrock turned purple and appeared to be threatened with an attack of apoplexy. "What?" he roared. "You saying that I cut your fence?"

"Who else?" replied the young man calmly.

Damrock began sputtering again, but Sheriff Dole's harsh voice interrupted him.

"Come on, John," said the sheriff. "All this palaver doesn't help things. Hurry! I've got to be getting to town."

Damrock subsided in angry rumblings. Jim picked up the fallen Colt from where it lay beside the trail and handed it to him.

"She's smashed around the lock," the Ranger commented, "but here she is."

Damrock took the shattered weapon and thrust it savagely into its holster. Then he gathered up his reins and he and the sheriff rode past Jim and disappeared in the direction the group of punchers had taken.

Jim watched them out of sight and then turned to the young man Damrock had called Carney. Carney had caught his horse, which appeared little the worse for its tumble, and was waiting for Jim to mount.

"There isn't much use to try and thank you for what you did, feller," he said, "but I'm sure grateful."

"Forget it," said Jim, swinging into the saddle. "If your *casa* isn't too far off you can sort of even things up by rustling a little chuck. I could stand some food about now."

Carney swung into the saddle. "Just about a half hour ride," he replied. "I can throw a feed together in no time. I've got a young rooster what's been crowing his bigness for quite a spell now, and I'm pretty good at biscuits. Fried chicken with biscuits and gravy oughtn't to go so bad, eh?"

"Can't you arrange to get yourself chased and shot at every so often?" Jim sighed. "I'll sure be willing to do the rescuing."

CHAPTER V

Wire-Cutters Missing

ON THAT short ride to the Bar C, Jim Rance studied Tom Carney. The young man had frank hazel eyes, a good-tempered mouth, red hair and freckles. He was slightly built but appeared wiry. He was still somewhat shaken from the hard fall he had suffered but was recovering rapidly.

"You ought to carry a gun when you go riding around," the Ranger pointed out.

"I know I ought," Carney admitted, "but I just can't seem to get in the habit. I come from a place where things are peaceful. I forget every now and then and ride out without being heeled.

"Lucky for John Damrock I didn't have a rifle today," he added. "I'd have cut him in two when he throwed down on you that way."

"I sorta believe Damrock was telling the truth when he said he was just aiming to scare me," mused Jim.

"He was," Carney agreed unexpectedly. "Damrock don't lie—at least about things like that. Can't hardly expect him to admit to fence cutting in the presence of witnesses."

"You really think Damrock cut your fence?" Jim asked curiously.

"Yes," replied Carney instantly. "He or some other of the big cattle owners. Who else?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" the Ranger declared to himself. Aloud he said, "It's all foolishness, this quarreling between the big ranchers and the little ones. There's plenty of range for everybody and the time will come when all the range'll be fenced. This country is filling up and folks are going to make homes here. There'll be enough trouble, with stray Injuns and Mexican bandits and other bad men, without decent folks gunning for each other. Is that your spread down there?"

"Uh-huh," Carney replied, "that's the Bar C. Pretty, isn't it?"

It was. A small valley ringed about by low hills. A creek assured water, and groves and clumps of trees provided ample shade. Carney's ranchhouse was a fair-sized 'dobe affair with verandas and an inner patio, Mexican style.

"I got three pastures fenced now," he told Jim. "Biggest one is right there at the head of the valley."

"Yeah, right where wire-cutters can get at it easy," commented the Ranger.

While they ate golden fried chicken and put away vast numbers of hot biscuits and gravy, Jim continued to study the young rancher. When he finally pushed back his chair and deftly rolled a cigarette, he had arrived at a decision.

"Carney," he said, "have you got any idea why I rode down here from town?"

"No," said Carney.

"Well," said Jim, "my business was to look your place over and report back the best way to cut your fence and run your stock off. Information on chances of planting a little lead

in your carcass would be welcome, too."

Carney stared at him goggle-eyed. "Wh-what?" he stuttered at last.

"Uh-huh," Jim nodded. "Listen," he went on, "I have figured you for a feller who can keep his mouth shut. I'm going to give you the low-down on the whole business."

IN TERSE sentences Rance related his conversation with Miguel Garcia. "Guess that jigger figured that because I hold down a job in the Black Ace, I'd be ready for anything," he concluded, having made no mention of his first encounter with the wire-cutter, Squinty, on the trail into Alamita.

"Also I've worked out a little scheme to give those sidewinders a dose of their own medicine, and I need your help to put it over," Jim went on.

"Count me in on anything," Carney promised grimly. "I'll follow your lead, feller."

Jim nodded his approval. "That's talking," he said. "First thing to do is fork your bronc and ride to town with me. When you get there, buy some dynamite and a couple of old muzzle-loading shotguns. There's a shop close to the Black Ace that sells 'em. Tomorrow afternoon I'll ride out here again and we'll fix up a surprise for Senor Garcia and his outfit."

Late that night, after the Black Ace had closed, Jim visited Garcia's place.

"Everything is shaping up fine," he told the Mexican. "Made friends with Carney and Friday night he's going to ride to town and spend the evening at the Black Ace. He won't get home before daylight. That's your chance. There's a nice herd in that big fenced pasture right at the mouth of the valley. Just cut the front fence and drive 'em out. Might as well cut the whole fence while you're at it—do a good job."

Garcia's pointed teeth showed in an evil smile. He passed a small roll of bills to the Ranger.

"There's your first pay," he said. "You're doing fine. Just keep it up and there'll be more where this came from. Friday night, you say?"

Before noon Friday Jim was at the Bar C. Carney called a greeting from the ranchhouse door and, after stabling his horse, Jim went to the house.

"Yeah, I got everythin'," Carney answered his question, "and I sent my two riders to town with orders not to show up here before Saturday afternoon. I had 'em run all but a few of the steers out of the front pasture and then cut brush and pile it around so it will look like a sleeping herd in the dark, like you said to do. Just what have you got on your mind, pardner?"

"I'll show you, pronto," Jim told him with a grin. "You made a wooden box that will hold the shotgun, didn't you? All right, get a saw and a mattock and a spade and we'll amble out to the front pasture."

At the front fence of the pasture Jim set to work. First he chose a particularly crooked post and sawed it off flush with the ground, leaving it with only the fence wires supporting it, although to the casual observer it appeared as firm as its fellows. Next he carefully removed some sod and dug a shallow hole near the post. In this hole he placed the narrow wooden box destined to hold the shotgun. He ran a wire from the bottom of the post in such a manner that its free end could be affixed to the shotgun trigger.

"Now comes the ticklish part," he told Carney. "Maybe you'd better trot up to the house and stay there till I've finished the job."

Carney let out an indignant howl. "What do you think I am?" he demanded. "Here you are, risking your life fixing up a contraption to protect my property. Now you expect me to run and hide under the bed while you're doing it. No! I'm staying right here!"

Jim grinned, and said nothing

more. He loaded the shotgun with a good charge of powder, wadded it down and dropped a dynamite cap on top of the wadding. Then he carefully split a stick of dynamite and filled the gun barrel to the muzzle with the crumbly stuff.

WITH even greater care he cocked the shotgun, fastened the wire to the trigger and placed the gun in the box. Then he put a percussion cap on the shotgun nipple. Next he laid in some loose sticks of dynamite and very gently placed the lid on the box. He gingerly filled the hole with loose earth and replaced the sod. Then he stood up.

Carney wiped the sweat from his face with a shaking hand. "Gosh!" he breathed, "I don't think I took a breath while you were putting that devilish thing in the box and covering it up. Just suppose she had gone off while you were handling it!"

"Well, if she had, somebody would have had to go around with a blotter and a broom on Resurrection Day to get enough of us together to start the show," Jim said, and grinned. "See how she'll work?"

"Sure," answered Carney. "When those fellers cut the wire, that loose post will fall over and the bottom end'll kick up, pulling the trigger of the shotgun and setting off the powder charge. Then the powder sets off the dynamite cap and the dynamite cap sets off the dynamite, and —well, there'll be less wire-cutting skunks in the neighborhood!"

"Right!" said the Ranger grimly. "That's what I'm hoping for. Anyhow, it'll give 'em such a scare as ought to keep 'em away from the Bar C for quite a spell.

"I wouldn't have gone this far if it hadn't been for that nice little scheme of theirs to drygulch you along with cutting your fence and running off your stock," he added; "but the only way to deal with hydrophobia skunks is to wipe 'em out."

Together they rode back to Alamita. Jim went to work at the Black Ace and Carney sat in a poker game where he was plainly visible to anybody entering the saloon. His two cowboys were also conspicuous about the place, half drunk and getting drunker.

Shortly after dark Squinty sauntered in, bought a drink and left. Glancing out a window, Jim saw him hurrying in the direction of Garcia's. The Ranger's lips wreathed in a mirthless grin.

* * * * *

Night brooded over the lonely Bar C ranchhouse. To the south the distant mountains of Mexico were a purple mystery under the star burned vault of the sky. Occasionally coyotes howled mournfully. In the front pasture in the valley mouth were shadowy clumps that appeared to be sleeping cattle. Now and then the fitful bleat of a restless steer helped the coyotes to quiver the blue and silver veil of the silence. The moonless dark softened the rugged outlines of hill and ridge and brimmed the canyons with yielding velvet.

Tip-tapping through the dark came the sound of nervous hoofs. Cautious voices hummed in choppy undertone. Shadows loomed against the star glow. There was a jingle of bridles, a creaking of stiff saddle leather.

THE shadows vanished in the gloom of a grove some distance from the ranchhouse. From the gloom crept smaller shadows, three of them. They approached the front pasture fence, crouching, alert.

"There isn't anybody here!" growled a voice. "I tell you Squinty saw Carney and both his men in the Black Ace. Carney was busy playing poker and the hands were getting drunk. We got plenty of time and there's no danger."

"Uh-huh," replied another voice, doubtingly. "That's what you say. But you weren't here the other time we tried to cut this fence. Every-

thing looked just as quiet and peaceful as it does tonight, but before the first strand was down that Carney cut loose from the house with a scattergun. I was stooping over picking up my nippers when he did it. Man! I didn't sit comfortably for a month!"

"Well, he isn't here tonight," said the first voice. "Get busy, you jugheads."

Followed the sound of steel nippers clipping wire. A strand fell to the ground with a soft rustle. Another followed it. The nipper jaws closed on a third.

Cr-r-r-r-rash!

The solid ranchhouse, the trees, and the very hills themselves seemed to rock and reel before the thundering blast. Lurid reddish light splashed the landscape as with thick blood. A howling hurricane tore at the grasses and showered leaves to the ground. On its wings it bore the splintered fragment of an awful scream.

Followed a tingling silence, broken by a strange swift patter and thump of falling objects, and the terrified bawl of cattle.

CHAPTER VI

The Doublecross

RANGER JIM RANCE did not see Tom Carney again until Saturday evening. The young ranch owner was grave of face.

"Half a boot with a foot in it was the biggest chunk I found," he told the Ranger. "There's a hole in the pasture about the size of the barn.

"I came across three horses tied in those trees alongside the trail," he added. "They were saddled and bridled. What'll I do with 'em?"

"Turn them loose on the range, just like they are," Jim counseled. "When they find their way home, that'll give those jiggers something to puzzle over. Chances are they're puzzled already, because the fellers they sent to do the job haven't showed up. Be sure and fill that hole and sod it over tonight when you get back. We want to keep 'em guessing all the time.

"I'll bet Garcia is fit to be roped! By the way, you hustle over to the sheriff's office and let out a howl about your fence being cut and a big herd run off. That ought to help."

Garcia was "fit to be roped" when Jim visited him along toward morning. "Those dirty crooks!" he bawled. "When I lay hands on them they'll learn a lesson they won't forget." He lapsed into Spanish and swore pungently.

"What's the matter?" Jim asked him.

"Matter a-plenty!" snarled the Mexican. "I sent Jones and Bowles and Carl Fente to handle that Bar C job Friday night!"

"Well, didn't they handle it?" Jim asked. "Carney was yelling his head off to the sheriff yesterday—said he lost his whole shipping herd. You better not be talking so loud."

"Sure they handled it!" roared Garcia, beside himself with rage and throwing caution to the wind. "They handled it too blasted well. There hasn't been anybody who's seen anything of them or that herd either since they left here Friday night!"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that they widelooped the herd and run it across the Line or some place themselves. There just don't seem to be no honesty any more. The dirty thieves!"

Jim shook his head sympathetically at this lapse of morals on the part of Garcia's fence-cutters.

"Drop in and see me tomorrow night," said the saloon keeper. "I got an appointment with a feller for now."

Garcia paused to speak with his head bartender. Jim left the saloon. He crossed the street and halted in the shadow of a tree. Soon he saw Garcia come through the swinging

doors and hurry down the street. Jim Rance followed him at a safe distance.

Garcia turned into a dim side street. A little later he entered a small building in which a light burned behind closely drawn shades.

Jim cautiously approached the building. The door through which Garcia had entered was closed. Only thin slices of light seeped through the windows that flanked it. Try as he would, the Ranger could not obtain a view of the inside of the room. He could hear an indistinct rumble of voices.

A side window afforded no better results. Jim slipped around to the back of the building. Here he found a door.

With the greatest care he tried the knob. It turned easily. The door swung back on noiseless hinges.

HE PAUSED for a moment, peering, listening. Inside was a dim glow of reflected light; he could hear voices. Hesitating no longer, he stepped into the room, softly closing the door behind him. For another moment he stood perfectly still, waiting for his eyes to grow accustomed to the faint light.

He was in what appeared to be a kitchen. Across the room was a partially closed door, through which streamed a bar of light. He glided silently across the room and set his eye to the door crack.

"Well, I'll be a hung sheep herder!" he breathed.

At a table under a shaded lamp sat two men. One was Miguel Garcia. The other was Sheriff Bart Dole. The sheriff was in the act of passing a roll of bills to the saloon keeper.

"That's what you were promised for the job," said Dole. "I can't help it if your hands went crooked and run off with the steers. That's your lookout."

Garcia swore in crackling Spanish as he counted the money. "It'll be their lookout, their last one, when I catch them!" he growled. He stowed the money away and leaned across the table.

"Bart," he said, "there's something else I want to talk to you about."

"Spill it," said the sheriff.

"It's about them," said Garcia, lowering his voice. "Bart, why should we let this thing get out of our hands? Why should we let them —those outsiders—have the running of things? Sure I know they're paying good money for what we do, but why shouldn't they? This thing is big, and they stand to hog most of it. Why let 'em do it? Why not get in on the big end ourselves?"

"You mean double-cross them?" asked the sheriff coldly.

GARCIA shrugged with Latin expressiveness.

"That's a sort of ugly word to use," he remarked. "I'd call it protecting our own interests."

His eyes suddenly blazed and in his excitement he lapsed into Spanish and the broken English of the illiterate Mexican.

"Thees thing, eet ees immense!" he mouthed. "Millions! Many millions! *Madre de Dios!* Why geev eet to others—outsiders! Bart, I do not trust them. They are smart—veree smart—they leave us perhaps ze bag to hold. We get ze chicken feed! They get ze money."

The sheriff's harsh voice broke in on his tirade. "Cut it!" rasped Dole. "Your rope's trailing! This isn't a business to go off half-cocked over. How are we going to swing this thing without money, big money? That's where they come in. What we got to do is clean this Basin, and clean it fast.

"I get the shakes every time I think of what some darn lucky fool may stumble on. Carney's place is the worst danger spot. That might be where they first would run on it. We got to get him out of there quick. If he ever learns that—"

In the outer room, Jim Rance had gotten into an unbearably cramped position. He moved slightly to ease

his aching muscles, his hand struck a tin bucket balanced on the very edge of a table and sent it crashing to the floor. Instantly the sheriff's voice chopped off in the middle of a word.

Garcia let out a startled oath. Chairs banged back as the two jumped to their feet.

Jim leaped for the door, fell over the accursed bucket and sprawled on his face. A gun roared and a bullet screeched through the inner door, showering the Ranger with splinters. He writhed over convulsively, got to his hands and knees and slewed sideward as another slug yelled past him.

"Who is it?" howled the sheriff.

"Can't see!" shouted Garcia, throwing down for another shot.

Jim Rance surged to his feet, hand streaking to his holster. The big Colt swung up and blazed.

THERE was a jangling crash, a yell from the front room, and the big hanging lamp went out. Darkness, like the inside of a black bull at the bottom of a well at midnight, swooped down.

Jim caught the faint glimmer of a window in back. He went through it in a streaking dive that took glass and sash with him in splintered fragments. He landed on hands and knees, rolled over and over and scrambled to his feet. In another instant, the shadow of a row of 'dobes had swallowed him up. For an instant he crouched listening, smoking gun ready.

He could hear Sheriff Dole roaring profanity. Men were running and shouting in the street fronting the sheriff's office.

Jim cursed that inopportune bucket with fervor. "In another minute Dole would have told what it is he and his pack of sidewinders are interested in. One thing is sure, the right place to find out is at Carney's range. I'm going to ride down there in a day or two and take a look-see."

CHAPTER VII

The Plot That Failed

THE Ranger found Sam Sullivan a busy man when he reported for work the following evening. "Today's payday for most of the big spreads," explained Sullivan. "Everybody'll be in town and we can sort of look for a roaring big night. Got your guns oiled up?"

Things did pick up in the Black Ace. Soon after dark the big saloon began to fill. Sinewy cowboys, spurs jingling, holsters tapping muscular thighs, wide hats tipped rakishly over one eye, tied their horses at long hitch-racks across the street and strode into the Black Ace.

They lined the bar three deep, filled the games and crowded the dance floor. With them came flashily dressed Mexicans, miners with muddy boots, bushy whiskers, and plenty of money. Small ranch owners and town folk helped swell the crowd. There was also a sprinkling of lean, sunburned men whom Jim recognized as small ranchers who had settled in the Basin.

"The makings of plenty trouble in this bunch," mused the Ranger.

The crowd, however, was mostly good-natured. Isolated arguments arose from time to time, but the tall floor man had little trouble quelling the wranglers, who were willing to listen to reason, especially when it was backed up by two heavy Colts sagging low in quick-draw holsters. Jim spoke quietly and made no threats, but one look into those level green eyes convinced belligerent gents that little was to be gained by seeking a showdown.

He quickly learned, however, that while the crowd respected his undoubted ability to enforce order, it was not particularly friendly to him. Evidently the possemen had spread the story of the assistance he had

rendered a wire-cutter caught red-handed. The comradely salutations of the rat-faced Squinty and several others of his kind did not tend to increase his popularity with the decent element. Jim sensed the feeling of hostility and was not displeased.

"The more these fellers know they ain't got no use for me, the more the other sort'll think I'm one of 'em," he told himself.

The crowd thinned a bit after midnight and Jim was better able to note individual groups and faces. He was puzzled by a half dozen men who started a poker game at a vacant table. He recognized them as saloon hangers-on and loafers who seldom had the price of a drink, much less money to finance a quite respectable game of stud.

"Somebody'll be reporting a stealing before morning, or I miss my guess," he deduced shrewdly. "Those road runners are sure making plenty of noise."

Without doubt they were. The game progressed to the accompaniment of violent wrangling. Jim took to watching the table rather closely, anticipating possible trouble. Quickly, however, his shrewd mind sensed a false note in the too emphatic arguments.

"They're just trying to attract attention to themselves," he muttered. "Why?"

Sullivan, the proprietor, strolled across the room in his direction. "Not a bad night," he commented. "I got to hand it to you, feller. You sure have kept things peaceful. Not that we've had a tough crowd here tonight—yet," he hastened to add. "None of the Sulphur Hills outfit has dropped in. Oh-ho! Here comes something that isn't so tame, either!"

His sudden digression was prompted by the entrance of three men who came purposefully through the swinging doors.

THE one in the lead was broad-shouldered and powerfully built, with gorilla-like arms swinging loosely, the blunt fingers reaching almost to his bowed knees. His eyes were colorless and devoid of expression, his mouth a bloodless gash in his swarthy face. The pair following him were taller and slighter of build, but of a sinewy leanness that bespoke reserves of strength. Like their leader, their faces were hard, their eyes cold.

The Ranger, apparently looking the other way, but noting everything, caught the lightning flicker of a glance in his direction and a movement of thin lips, as if a mutter of words passed among the trio.

"Who are they?" he asked, letting his gaze shift casually in the direction of the door.

"Ad Phelps and two of his sidekicks," replied Sullivan.

"Phelps?" repeated Jim. "Seems to me I've heard that name before."

"Chances are you have," growled Sullivan. "Phelps is John Damrock's foreman. Damrock isn't a bad sort, only he thinks big ranch owners are the Lord's appointed and ought to have everything handed 'em on a silver platter.

"Why he hired that corpse-faced devil I don't know, unless he figured there was sure to be a range war here sooner or later and he needed a prize gunman or two. Trouble is, Phelps, for this reason and that, began to get rid of Damrock's regular punchers and hired other men in their places.

"Before old John knew what was happening he had a whole crew of cold-blooded killers working for him. I sure wouldn't sleep easy of nights if I had an aggregation like that bedded down in my bunkhouse, though!"

Jim agreed with Sullivan as he watched the unsavory trio shoulder their way to the bar. They ordered whisky and drank it straight, filling their glasses from a bottle left on the bar at Phelp's elbow. From time to time they talked in low tones, their heads close together. Rance, standing in a far corner, where it was

somewhat shadowy, saw something that narrowed his eyes and tightened his wide mouth.

The group at the poker table was making more noise than ever. As they argued, they glanced repeatedly toward the bar. Finally the gorilla-armed Phelps turned, rested his elbows on the bar, and nodded slightly. His followers began to sidle away from him, spreading out fanwise to command the entire room.

JIM RANCE strolled out of the shadow and paused at the edge of the dance floor. From where he was he had a clean sweep across the room to the bar. He stood there, his eyes apparently fixed on the wranglers at the poker table.

Suddenly the trouble at the table came to a head. Two men leaped to their feet, cursing loudly and pawing at gun butts. Jim Rance started across the room. His quick ears caught the sound of shuffling feet near the bar. He took one more long stride in the direction of the brawlers who were howling at each other and making threatening gestures. Then he slewed sideways like a falling leaf in a gust of wind. His slim hands moved with the speed of striking snakes.

He caught Ad Phelps' two companions with their guns half out of their holsters. Phelps, with a hair-trigger mind and perfectly coordinated muscles, interpreted the Ranger's move correctly. His gun was throwing down as Jim turned.

The two reports blended in a crack-ripple of sound. A red smear leaped across the Ranger's cheek. A window flew in fragments where the bullet went its screeching way. Phelps tripped hammer again, but his gun muzzle was already sagging toward the floor. The six dropped from his nerveless hand and he crumpled up on top of it, blood pouring from a jagged furrow just above his left temple. Jim's guns swung to cover his two companions.

The Black Ace Saloon vibrated with a roar of six-shooters. Rance, weaving, ducking, crouching, threw bullet after bullet at the two gunmen by the bar. They shot his hat from his head, ripped one shirt sleeve to shreds and burned his neck with a slug. Then they died!

Jim, eyes flitting in all directions, shot across his own right arm and one of the squabblers at the poker table dropped a gun, let out a long howl and went down clutching a smashed shoulder. His companions scattered like scared partridge chicks in a grass patch. Two went clang-crashing through windows; the others nearly tore the swinging doors from their hinges.

The Ranger blasted the doors to bits behind them. Sam Sullivan, roaring profanity, threw down on the crowd with a cocked double-barreled shotgun. Two bartenders, likewise armed, leveled their weapons across the bar.

"Any gent who wants to carry his brains home in a basket just start somethin'!" bawled Sullivan.

Nobody seemed disposed to argue the matter with him. Somebody helped the wounded poker player, moaning and retching, to his feet and hustled him outside.

"This jigger's just creased," reported a man who knelt beside Phelps. Ad opened his eyes a moment later and swore weakly.

Jim Rance shoved fresh cartridges into his empty guns, holstered them and walked over to the two dead men. He glanced coldly into their distorted faces and turned to Phelps.

"It didn't work, feller," he said softly. "It was a cute little scheme all right, to have those fools stage a fracas to attract my attention. Then when I took it up you would have horned in and downed me. Uh-huh, cute little scheme but it didn't work."

His eyes suddenly blazed green fire and his soft voice turned coldly ferocious. "No, it didn't work!" his words spat at the Lazy D foreman

like bullets. "And the only thing that saved you from trailing along with them is the fact that your head is so rock hard it turned a slug. Next time you'll get it dead center, if there ever is a next time!"

Sick, shaking, his face a dirty gray, Phelps snarled up from the floor, nothing of fear in his voice or eyes, only bitter, relentless hate:

"There'll be a next time, you can gamble on that!"

Shoving aside the hands of those who were endeavoring to assist him, he lurched to his feet and staggered out of the saloon. Jim watched him go, a speculative look in his eyes.

"Plenty of sand," he mused. "Seems all the badmen in this district have got plenty of nerve."

Sheriff Dole came shouldering through the shattered swinging doors. "What has been going on here?" he demanded.

"Just a few trouble-makers got rebuked," Sullivan told him. "Call it a little friendly shooting."

"Yeah, I heard about it," growled the sheriff. "Looks to me like it's up to the law to take a hand in this. Two killings calls for a little investigatin'."

He turned on his heel and walked to where Rance was swabbing the trickles of blood from his face with a handkerchief.

"Feller, you're coming with me," he stated. "You can't get away with promiscuous killings hereabouts and nothing said. You're going to be locked up till this business is looked into."

Jim Rance did not move, did not speak. He merely looked Dole squarely in the eyes. For a tense instant they glared at each other.

Old Sam Sullivan's voice breathed over the Ranger's shoulder:

"Go with him, son, and don't argue. I'll be right behind you, and Artie, my head bartender, will sit in the jail office while you're there. I'll rout Jedge Parker out of bed and get a writ that'll turn you loose in a hour."

Jim nodded shortly. "All right, Dole," he told the sheriff. "I'll go along with you, but I'm not walking in front of you!"

BART DOLE ground his teeth at the implication, but answered nothing. Side by side the two walked from the saloon, old Sam and his taciturn bartender bringing up the rear. Artie, a grim old veteran of Indian fighting days, still carried his shotgun under his arm.

At the jail office, Jim handed Dole his guns and was locked in a cell. The sheriff reached for Artie's shotgun and got a snarl like the buzz of an angry rattlesnake. He wisely desisted. Considerably less than an hour later, Sullivan walked into the office. He bore a writ signed by Judge Parker, ordering the sheriff to free Jim pending investigation of the killings. Dole swore blackly but was forced to obey the Judge's writ.

"Bart's got considerable political drag," Sullivan told Jim as they walked back to the saloon, "but I'm not a friendless snide myself. The judge knows who got him elected.

"Old Sam's a sort of bad lot, according to decent folks," he went on, "but he sticks by his friends and the men who work for him."

Jim nodded. "It won't be forgotten, Sullivan, when the proper time comes," he promised.

Little did old Sam Sullivan realize how much that kept promise would mean to him in the days to come, when the "Gentlemen in the White Hats" would take over the ordering of things in Alamita Basin.

The week following was a busy one for Jim Rance and a turbulent one for the Alamita Basin. As if the row in the Black Ace had touched off hidden triggers, the big valley flamed from end to end with violence and unrest. Two small ranches were raided—by Mexicans from below the Line, said the big ranch owners—by the barons of the open range, said the nesters. The owners of the spreads in question were unable to voice an opinion.

They were left dead amid the ashes of their burned homes.

A perfect inferno of wire-cutting followed the raids. They were enlivened by a killing or two. A group of nesters fought a pitched battle with cowboys from one of the big ranches, in the course of which several men were seriously wounded.

The foreman of a big outfit was drygulched and left in the dust of the trail with a bullet hole between his shoulder blades. His men hanged a suspected nester for the crime. The sheriff refused to arrest the lynchers because of alleged lack of evidence which did not tend to ease the tension.

Then "Old Man" Robinson, who owned the big Tumbling R, stormed into town in a black rage. The Tumbling R had lost a shipping herd and two of its nighthawks had been shot, in the bargain. Robinson cursed the sheriff to his face and delivered his unvarnished opinion of all law enforcement agencies of the state. He concluded with an ultimatum that set law-abiding people to thinking seriously.

"I'm pullin' out for New Mexico next month, that's what I'm doin'," he declared profanely. "Whoever the jigger was who first said there isn't any law west of the Pecos, sure had Texas in mind. Maybe if I can go far enough west I may find a section where decent folks can hold their property on their own spreads and keep their skins unpunctured!"

Others voiced like sentiments. Several nester families pulled up stakes and departed for parts unknown.

An urgent message was sent to Austin by anxious citizens, requesting a company of Rangers, the National Guard, the Army, anything! Nothing came of the request. Unknown to the petitioners, Sheriff Bart Dole, politically powerful, put forth his hand and brought their efforts to naught.

ALL of which gave Jim Rance plenty to think about. Where another might have been tempted to call on his superiors for advice or assistance, the grim stony-faced Ranger merely tightened his lean jaw a bit, oiled his guns and went on looking for a solution to the mystery. He visited Miguel Garcia in his dingy *cantina* and found the Mexican raving.

"The broncs Jones, Bowles, and Fente rode the night they cut Carney's fence!" he sputtered as soon as he and Jim were alone at a table in a quiet corner.

"Uh-huh, what of 'em?" asked the Ranger.

"They come home, saddled and bridled!" barked Garcia. "Now what do you think about that?"

Jim shook his head in apparent bewilderment.

"There's something almighty funny about it," went on Garcia. "Those three fellers didn't ride off bareback on steers, and they didn't walk. I'll bet that Carney had something to do with it. I got a hunch he put one over on us, a mighty fast one, too!"

"How could he have put one over when he was in town all that night, and his punchers, too?" wondered Jim.

"I don't know," admitted Garcia, "but I got a hunch he did. Well, I'm fixing up another little party for that jigger. A surprise."

"What are you fixing up now?" asked Jim casually.

"Never mind," replied Garcia, "but it's good. You'll know when the time comes, and so'll everybody else."

Jim was decidedly perturbed at this, but he did not dare show undue curiosity. Above all he did not wish to arouse suspicion in the Mexican.

"I'll have another little job for you before long," added Garcia. "Say, the way you handled Ad Phelps and his gang the other night was something fancy. Ad's always looking for trouble. I told him you were the right sort and were playing the game proper when you took up for Car-

ney that time, but Ad couldn't see it. He's got a notion he's the one big skookum he-wolf of these diggings and he's always out to prove it. I figure he won't howl quite so loud for a spell, now."

Jim nodded without comment and Garcia was moved to give a little friendly advice.

"Look out for Ad, feller," he said. "He's not the forgetting or the forgiving kind. He'll even things up for that creased head if he gets a chance."

Jim left the *cantina* in no very pleasant frame of mind.

"What can that black-hearted scoundrel be cooking up for Tom Carney?" he puzzled. "Guess I'd better ride down to the Bar C tomorrow and have a little powwow with Tom. While I'm at it, I'll just take a look at that range, too. Maybe I can catch on to what's interestin' Bart Dole there."

Right at that moment, had Jim only known it, a telegraph blank was interesting Sheriff Bart Dole. The result of the sheriff's interest in the blank created interest and discussion in the mahogany New York office. The hatchet-faced man who sat at the head of the table deciphered the message.

THINGS SHAPING UP FINE. ALREADY STARTING TO MOVE OUT. SITUATION WELL IN HAND. SHOULD BE ABLE TO START ACQUISITION SOON. SEND INSTRUCTIONS AND AUTHORITY.

D.

"Looks as if our sheriff has got down to business," remarked one of the capitalists. "What are you going to wire him, Cartwright?"

THE man at the head of the table creased the telegram, creased it again and slowly tore it into tiny bits.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I feel that this matter now merits personal attention and supervision. I believe I had better go to Alamita and remain there until our plans mature. Brunner, have your secretary procure train schedules and make reservations for me."

The man called Brunner protested. "But how are you going to keep under cover?" he asked. "They'll spot you there as a stranger and out of character in that place. Somebody is likely to become suspicious. I think you had better let Dole continue to handle the field end of the business."

Benson Cartwright smiled thinly. "I will not be out of character," he stated deliberately. "You forget, Brunner, that I got my start in a gold-strike camp. I am not what the West considers a tenderfoot. Watch!"

From a drawer in the mahogany table he drew a pack of cards. His long, tapering fingers riffled the pasteboards, cut, dealt. The cards

seemed to flow from under his hands, to drift back between his fingers and disappear and reappear like elusive shadows. He dealt Brunner four aces, showing him each card as he laid it face down on the table, but when Brunner picked up the hand, he held a pair of deuces, a seven and a four-spot. Brunner let out a long whistle.

"I'll say you ought to be able to get by," he admitted admiringly. "*Hmmm!* I begin to see why you are so uniformly lucky at the club." A retrospective gleam flickered in his little pig eyes and he passed a hand over his fat face that, paradoxically, had not the least appearance of softness.

"Be careful you don't play with a stacked deck in this game, Cartwright," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

Into the Depths

NEITHER Carney nor his cowboys were at home when Jim arrived at the Bar C. After a moment's hesitation, the Ranger rode slowly up the valley. He rode for an hour or more, noting the good grass and water the sheltered valley afforded, but found little else of interest.

"She's a nice strip of range, all right," he conceded, "but I'm darned if I can see anything about it to warrant all the row that's bein' kicked up. What is here that's got Dole and Garcia so excited? Far as I can see, there's not a thing what can't be spotted easy by anybody."

Only one feature of the valley more than casually interested the Ranger. Several times in the course of his ride he noted long, low domes or swells that appeared out of place in the general topography of the valley. Some of these domes were several miles in extent and would not have been noticed by other than a trained cattleman sensitive to natural formations and their relation to the care and movement of stock.

Something about those domes touched a chord of memory in the Ranger's mind. He instinctively felt that they possessed a peculiar significance and that the significance, in some way or other, was geologic.

Jim Rance had gone through college before disastrous blizzards and droughts, which occasioned the loss of his father's ranch, and the subsequent death of the elder Rance had sent young Jim back to the saddle and the rope and later into the Ranger service.

Now he dimly recalled a lecture by a professor of geology, in the course of which just such formations were dealt with. The thing interested him mildly, but he did not connect it with the solution of the problem which engrossed him.

"Looks like Carney and his boys must be way up near the head of the valley," he mused as he slowly followed the curve of the hills, which were steadily growing steeper and more precipitous.

The valley, in fact, was changing to a canyon, the floor of which sloped steeply upward. To right and left, he knew, was the unfenced Lazy D range, the hills themselves forming the natural boundary of the strip Carney owned by right of settlement and purchase. The creek, which was wide and deep, almost a river, now flowed at the bottom of a rocky gorge.

The Ranger rode along the lip of the gorge, sweeping the narrowing, wooded valley for some traces of Carney and his men. Across the cleft which walled the creek, tall cliffs frowned down upon him. Once he thought he saw something move on their brush grown crest, but he was not sure and attached no significance to it. He forgot it entirely when, glancing back the way he had come, he perceived a lone rider speeding toward him.

"Wonder if that's Carney?" he mused, reining in the golden sorrel on the very edge of the gorge.

Lounging easily in the saddle, he rolled a cigarette, glancing in the direction of the approaching rider from time to time. By leaning slightly he could look down the sheer face of the gorge wall to the foaming black water fifty feet below.

"Bad place to take a bath, that," he told the sorrel, who snorted agreement and moved his dainty hoofs uneasily.

"You won't drop over," Jim reassured him. "Just take it easy till that jigger back there catches up. Say," he exclaimed a minute later, "that isn't Carney! It looks like—like—by gosh, it is a girl."

It was. Jim took in further details as the chunky pinto she bestrode toiled up the rise. He noted short brown curls, escaping from under the

brim of her wide hat and kissing her creamily tanned cheeks, a red-lipped mouth, and a flash of dark eyes. She was tiny and slim, almost boyish in her trim riding outfit.

"As pretty as a garden of flowers," summed up Jim. "Wonder who—"

JIM RANCE ducked instinctively, the girl on the pinto forgotten. Once heard, the crackling, splitting sound that a high-power rifle bullet makes in boring a hole through the atmosphere close to one's head, is remembered. Jim Rance had heard that sound before and recognized it instantly.

Another shot rang out and the sorrel got that one. It burned a red streak across his glossy rump. He reared high, squealing his pain and indignation. Jim was almost jerked loose from the saddle. He gripped the reins frantically and yelled at the frantic horse. In that instant the third bullet arrived from the top of the cliff, but Jim didn't hear it.

What he did hear was a terrific grinding crash as if the sky were falling and the earth was split in twain. A blinding blaze of intense white light accompanied the explosion. Following it was a vast cloud of inky darkness that wrapped him in its icy folds.

Limply he slumped from the saddle, slithered over the rocky lip of the gorge and plunged to the white water fifty feet below.

The girl on the pinto pony saw it all. She was less than a score of yards away when the bullet struck Rance. She gasped back a scream as his limp body vanished into the gorge. The sorrel bolted a little distance and halted, pawing angrily and shivering his seared rump. The girl swung to the ground with lithe grace and ran to the spot where Jim had vanished.

Peering over the lip, she caught a glimpse of a white face just coming to the surface. She thought she detected a feeble movement of the hands as the current swirled the flaccid form toward mid stream.

She did not hesitate an instant. Tossing aside hat, quirt, and gun belt, she poised for a tense moment on the edge of the gorge. Leaning slowly forward, body rigid, she went over the lip.

It was a dive of breath-taking beauty. She hit the water clean and true, her dark head reappearing almost before her little feet vanished under the surface. With swift, strong strokes she headed for where the Ranger's body, caught in the full force of the current, was swirling down stream.

As she neared it, her eyes lighted eagerly. The hands were moving, feebly, jerkily, but moving! She noticed a red smear just below where the black hair grew over the left temple.

"Creased!" she panted, speeding her stroke. "Creased and knocked out! He'll be all right in a minute, if I can just catch him and give him a little help!"

She did catch him, although the stream ran like a mill race between its sheer walls, and the black water spouted and foamed against jagged fangs of stone. With one hand she held his head above the surface, fighting the current with the other. She was gasping for breath and her face was white with strain, but she held on grimly, her strength going fast.

Jim dimly knew what was going on, but his mind was numb. Inside his brain some unseen monitor clamored frantically, urging him to a definite course of action, just what he could not be sure. A hazy notion persisted that he should do something, but his groping faculties were still unconvinced that it was worth the required effort. He was very, very tired.

Suddenly the girl went under; Jim went with her. He took a breath while he was beneath the surface and came up strangling and gasping. The shock of it jerked his wandering senses back inside his skull and

slammed them together with unseemly violence. Instinctively he took a stroke, and another.

The physical effort dispelled the clouds entirely. A glimpse of the girl's white face as she went under again brought full command of his faculties. He flung out one long arm, gripped her firmly and began swimming strongly for the shore.

Abruptly he realized that there was no shore, only smooth walls of dark stone, against which the racing water hissed and gurgled.

"Got to go with the current a while," he muttered. "Buck up! We'll make it!" he encouraged the girl. She smiled wanly and made no unnecessary moves that would hamper him in the struggle.

"I'll—I'll be all right in a minute," she panted.

BUT she wasn't. The water was icy cold and the bite of it numbed her, and her strength, exhausted in that first bitter battle to save the drowning and near-unconscious man, did not return. The cold of the water affected the Ranger also, but his muscles were steel, and now he was fully himself again. Less than a mile ahead, he knew, the gorge must open out and the stream banks become shelving. Then with a sudden cold thrill he remembered the fall!

Where the stream dashed from the gorge was a fault in the rock formation, over which the swift water plunged in a perpendicular drop of more than a score of feet. Jim visualized the raving welter of the catch basin at the foot, with the water boiling and spouting against jagged masses of brown stone. To go over the fall meant death or, at the very least, serious injury, and an injured swimmer would never survive in the stormy rapids which stretched for another mile beyond the gorge.

"We just got to get out of this before he hit that drop!" he muttered, casting anxious glances about.

On either side the smooth walls dropped sheer to the water's edge. There was no sign of ledge or protuberance that would provide resting place for even a bird. The current was growing stronger; a low rumble quivered the air.

Jim tried to recall conditions just above the falls, but he had never ridden close to the gorge mouth and was not sure just what was what there. If the bank shelved before the fall was reached, they had a chance. If the rock walls remained sheer, they were doomed!

The Ranger was weakening also. There was a limit to even his iron strength. And, in addition to the shock of his wound and the loss of blood, the icy water was taking its toll. His strokes began to lose power, his breathing became more and more labored.

The girl was all but unconscious now. She hung limply in the crook of Jim's arm; her hands and feet barely moved. Her face was blue with cold, her lips colorless. Words seeped faintly between them.

"L-let me go—and—and—s a v e yourself! We'll—we'll—both drown —this way!"

"If we do, I'll start for the Great Divide in good company!" growled the Ranger. "You keep quiet and don't talk foolishness!" He glanced at the pale, brave face.

A wan smile answered him and then her long, dark lashes drooped over the big brown eyes and she hung in his arms without sound or movement.

Grimly the big Ranger fought for both their lives. He took a chance and worked as near as possible to the left wall of the gorge. The water was fairly racing now. Little waves splashed his face and choked him with spray. Eddies whirled him about and threatened to dash him against the glistening stone. The roar of the falls was vibrating thunder.

Craning his neck and raising his head a trifle, he could see the smooth,

black curve where the water flowed like oil over the crest. On the far side of the stream, almost at the edge of the falls, was a little strip of sandy beach that stretched to where the gorge walls fell away. On the near side, the cliff continued sheer!

There was not an instant to lose. With the last of his remaining strength, Jim cut diagonally across the stream, fighting the rushing current with agonized desperation. The terrific suck of the undertow rolled him over and over, weakened him, drew him under. He battled to the surface, clinging to the unconscious girl, stroking out madly with his free arm. The lip of the falls coiled toward him like an angry snake, the little strip of beach raced by.

Foot by agonized foot he gained against the current. The shadow of the far wall threw down across him. He could hear the hiss of the water on the sands, seeping through the thunder of the falls.

The reaching current lashed out hungrily! The falls roared its triumph! Grim despair gripped the Ranger's heart! Suddenly his pumping feet struck solidly against unyielding surface. He made a final desperate plunge, felt the mighty grip of the falls close on his body, and then the joyous feel of solid earth under his knees. Panting, quivering, black darkness closing before his eyes, he crawled through the last of the shallows, dragging the limp form of the girl with him. Utterly exhausted, he sank beside her on the damp sands.

CHAPTER IX

John Damrock Swears

WITH a chance to breathe and rest, Jim's strength came back rapidly. He sat up, brushing his wet hair back from his forehead, and gazed about. Scarce a dozen yards distant, the falls foamed and roared. The beach on which they lay stretched smoothly to where the gorge walls fell away and the prairie began. Jim turned his attention to the girl. She was still unconscious, but color was coming back into her cheeks and lips. Her breathing was regular.

"Knew enough to keep her mouth shut and not to swallow water," the Ranger muttered, chafing her hands and wrists. "She'll be all right in a jiffy."

The dark lashes fluttered, lifted. She sighed tremulously and smiled wanly at the Ranger. Jim grinned back at her.

"Had a nice trip, didn't we?" he remarked.

The girl sat up with difficulty. She leaned back against Jim's supporting arm and tried to wring some of the water from her drenched hair. She tossed the clinging curls back from her face and stared at him, a light of recognition dawning in her dark eyes.

"Why, I know who you are!" she exclaimed. "You're the man called Jim that Tom—that Mr. Carney talks about. The man who saved him from being killed!"

"Uh-huh," wondered Jim. "And who are you, ma'am?"

"I'm Rose Damrock."

"John Damrock is your dad?"

"Yes, John Damrock is my father."

Jim whistled softly under his breath, and asked another question. "What were you doing here on Bar C range, Miss Damrock?"

Color like dawnlight dripping from a rose suddenly poured into her soft cheeks. The long lashes fluttered down. Then they raised slightly and she cast a quick glance at Jim through their silken veil.

"I came to talk with Mr. Carney," she said.

Again Jim Rance whistled under his breath. Here was a complication with a vengeance.

"You'd have a hard time finding a nicer feller to talk to," he remarked, and added, "It was lucky for me you

decided to ride this way just when you did. If it hadn't been for you, that drygulcher up top that cliff would have made a finish job of it."

The girl shuddered. "Who could it have been?" she asked.

"Hard to tell," Jim replied. "Somebody who maybe doesn't like me, I guess. Of course, he might have mistaken me for somebody else."

The color drained from the girl's cheeks and in her eyes was a haunted look. "Yes, they might have," she breathed. "They might have thought it was Tom!"

"Not hardly, unless they got awful bad eyes," Jim reassured her. "I'm just about twice his size and he hasn't got a horse in his string that looks like Nugget. Nope, I calculate he knew who he was throwing lead at."

The haunted look was still in the girl's eyes. "That's Lazy D range up there, isn't it?" she asked.

"Sure is," Jim told her. He hastened to add, "Most anybody's liable to be riding across that way, though. The Canyon Trail that leads to Mexico isn't far from there and somebody might be taking a shortcut."

The girl nodded, but Jim felt that she was not impressed by his subterfuge. He changed the subject.

"Guess we'd better be heading back up the creek to our horses," he suggested. Rose Damrock agreed.

They poured the water from their boots, wrung as much as they could from their clothes, and made ready to start. Standing on the edge of the little beach, they faced each other, the girl's curly head coming barely to the tall Ranger's shoulder. Impulsively she held out a sun-golden little hand. Jim took it in his own sinewy fingers and they shook solemnly.

"Reckon you and I have got interests in common," remarked Jim. "Look me up any time something is botherin' you."

"I will," the girl promised earnestly. "It's good to have a friend on whom I can depend. Things have been rather difficult lately."

"I can see that," Jim admitted. "Now let's round up our broncs before the sun goes down, and it starts getting cool."

THE sun dried their clothes as they walked, and with the elasticity of youth and perfect health, they quickly threw off the effects of their harrowing experience. The girl deftly bound up the slight furrow in Jim's scalp and soon, aside from a headache, he was as good as ever. Neither the sorrel nor the girl's pinto had strayed far and were found grazing at the edge of a thicket.

Jim scanned the wooded cliff top carefully as they approached the spot where he had been shot into the stream but he saw no sign of the drygulcher.

"He wouldn't hang around long once he saw me take that header," the Ranger explained. "Chances are he didn't even see you jump in after me. That jigger'll get something of a start next time he sees me. I guess he's plumb certain in his own mind that I'm a goner."

Together they rode back down the valley to the Bar C ranchhouse. There they found one of Carney's punchers.

"The boss left for town a couple of hours ago," explained the cowboy. "I think he wanted to see you 'bout somethin'," he added to Jim. "He'll shore be sorry he missed you, Miss Rose."

Jim headed back to town, for it was growing late. Rose Damrock rode with him.

"I take that left fork of the trail three miles north of here," she explained.

They had almost reached the fork when Jim's quick eyes perceived two horsemen riding toward them.

"Here comes the law," he told the girl, recognizing the tall form of Sheriff Bart Dole, "and that looks like—yeah, it is your dad with him.

I got a notion he isn't going to be particularly pleased to see you riding with me."

Rose seemed little perturbed. "Oh, Dad doesn't think you're so bad," she replied. "Ad Phelps received very little sympathy from him when Dad heard about what happened in the Black Ace. Dad told Ad he got just what was coming to him—always looking for trouble."

As the pair drew closer, Jim saw a look of black rage distort Bart Dole's handsome face. He glared at Jim and turned accusing eyes on the girl. Old John Damrock appeared irritated. He nodded curtly to Jim and barked a question at his daughter.

"Where have you been, Rose?"

"I rode over to the Bar C to speak to Tom Carney," she replied calmly.

Old John's face turned purple and he appeared to breathe with difficulty. His daughter apparently took no notice of these alarming symptoms.

"Haven't I told you time and again to keep away from that blasted nester?" he bawled.

"You have," admitted Rose, "times without number."

Jim thought Damrock was going to explode. He managed to gulp down his anger, however, and threw out both hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I don't know what the world's coming to!" he bellowed. "Youngsters don't pay attention to what's said to 'em! If I'd gone where my father told me not to when I was your age, young lady, he'd have busted a singletree over my back!"

Rose rode over beside her father and leaned toward him. *"Pouff!"*

"Don't blow in my ear!" roared old John. "What have you been doing? You're soaking wet!"

"Jim Rance and I went swimming in Shadow Creek," replied his daughter sweetly.

Old John goggled, gasped, and then swore a bright blue oath with jagged purple edges.

"And you look as if you had some sense!" he bawled at Jim. "Guess you're like all other youngsters, loco as a loon!"

Still rumbling under his grizzled mustache, he wheeled his horse.

"Come on, Dole," he growled. "We might as well head back to the ranch. Rose, you cut for home and get some dry clothes on you! Want to come down with something? Swimming in Shadow Creek!"

AS HIS daughter obediently reined in beside him, he shot an unexpected remark at Jim:

"You better come along and get a change, too. I don't know what this's all about, but I'll bet you were in the right."

"Much obliged, sir," Jim replied, "but I'll be okay. Be late to work if I don't head for town."

Sheriff Dole said nothing, but there was an ugly gleam in his black eyes as he moved his horse as close to the girl's as possible. She appeared neither to resent nor welcome his presence. The expression on Dole's face as he looked at her told Jim plenty.

"Good-by—Jim!" she called as the trio turned off at the left fork.

"Good-by, Rose!" he replied.

Old John snorted and Sheriff Dole ground his teeth together. Jim Rance's firm lips quirked in a grin as he rode on toward town, but almost immediately they tightened sternly.

"This is getting to be more of a mess all the time," he told the sorrel. "John Damrock's girl is attracted by Tom Carney, the nester, and the sheriff is loco about her! No wonder Dole's on the prod so against Carney. I got to warn Tom about that jigger. I wouldn't put anything past him or that road runner of his, Garcia. Well, feller, I got a creased head and you got a burned rear. Guess we better do a little looking out for ourselves while we're at it. Wonder who that lead-slinging gent was?"

Jim found Tom Carney in the

Black Ace when he reached town. He briefly acquainted the nester with the afternoon's happenings. Carney's comments were astonished and profane.

"Yeah, Rose and I are figuring on getting married, if I can ever get that spread of mine completely paid for and see my way clear to making a living," he explained. "Her dad'll stand on his hind legs and paw, but he'll get over it. Maybe then he'll stop his men from cutting my fences and running off my cows."

"You still think Damrock cuts your fence?"

"Oh, he hires somebody to do it. Fellers like him and old Cale Robinson and Reb Russell think there isn't anything wrong in busting a nester, even if the nester has bought his land and got a title to it. They believe the whole range belongs to them, because they were here first."

He did not attempt to argue the matter, knowing it would be wasted effort. It was this attitude on the part of the small ranchers and the big ranch owners that made it so simple for the mysterious individuals represented by Dole and Garcia to stir up discord and further their sinister ends.

Jim repeated for Carney's benefit his conversation with Garcia.

"Keep your eyes skinned," he warned the nester. "That rattler is cooking up something and you won't find it tasting good when he dishes it out. He figures you did away with his three wideloopers somehow and he's out to even things up. You can count on Dole sneaking along to lend a hand, too."

The following day, Jim again rode toward the Bar C. Before reaching Carney's range, however, he turned off into the hills. Finally he found himself on top of the cliffs that looked across Shadow Creek Canyon. He could plainly see the spot where he had been shot from his horse the day before. Leaving the sorrel to crop grass in a nearby thicket, he painstakingly went over the ground. After a long search he found the thing he was seeking.

Glittering in a clump of grass was an empty cartridge case. Nearby the Ranger found two more. On hands and knees he examined the vicinity of the find. Plainly visible in the soft earth were footprints. Jim nodded with satisfaction.

"Uh-huh," he exulted. "Right here's where he stood. Let's see, now, where'd he rest his rifle?"

Placing his own feet carefully in the widespread boot tracks, he peered through a screening of brush toward the far lip of the gorge. Directly in front of him, breast high, was a stout branch. His keen eyes detected a slight abrasion on the surface of the bark. He examined it with care, noting its position in relation to his own body. His eyes narrowed at what the examination revealed.

"Uh-huh," he breathed. "The man who used that gun was left-handed. If he weren't, the marks would be a foot farther to the right. Now let's see . . ."

With eyes closed he visualized the fight in the Black Ace the week before. Yes, Phelps had drawn and shot with his left hand.

"Maybe it isn't evidence that would hold up before a jury," Jim concluded, "but it satisfies me. Ad Phelps, I reckon you're in for a whole lot of grief before this little business is finished."

Grim of jaw and hard of eye, he rode back to town.

CHAPTER X

Card Sharp

LIFE flowed on in the Alamita Basin. The time of the fall roundups was nearing. Tints of scarlet and gold were brightening the green of tree and shrub and wandering vine. The prairie grasses flowed like sunlit water before the winds, and the

winds themselves had a crisp freshness like golden wine gushing into a crystal goblet. A mellow haze softened the filmy blue of the sky. Over the great basin brooded a quiet loveliness and the peaceful hush of the deep-breathing year.

But the stream of life that flowed in the basin was far from peaceful. It was beset by cross currents, whirling eddies, angry rapids. Suspicion and hatred and unrest were everywhere.

Old man Robinson was busy getting his herds together in anticipation of his emigration to New Mexico. Reb Russell, who owned the Rockingchair, had expressed the intention of following Robinson. More small ranchers and farmers were preparing to leave.

Jim Rance was still seeking a solution of the mystery which bedeviled the valley. He shadowed Sheriff Dole, talked with Miguel Garcia as often as possible, and made several more trips across the Bar C range. He rendered abortive several of Garcia's plans for making trouble for small owners, and did it so skillfully that Garcia's suspicions were not aroused.

Tom Carney, warned in time by Jim, saved a shipping herd from raiders. The rustlers, Mexicans from below the Line apparently, left a dead man behind as silent testimony to the shooting ability of Tom Carney and his two punchers. Garcia cursed the mischance that had caused the raid to fail, and again hinted darkly to Jim Rance of a plot that would eliminate the troublesome Carney. He refused, however, to divulge its nature or details. Another monthly payday approached and Sam Sullivan prepared for a howling crowd and a night of big business.

"I've hired me a new faro dealer," Sullivan announced to Jim a couple of nights before payday. "Feller brought a letter from Branch Foster over at Crater. Branch was Bart Dole's pardner when Bart and he owned the Alhambra saloon. Branch writes this feller Haskins is right capable. He looks it, all right. I figured I might as well give him a try, seeing as Bill Fletcher is wanting to make a trip East to visit his folks."

Soon afterward the new dealer reported for work and quietly took Fletcher's place at the faro bank. Jim agreed with Sullivan that he appeared capable.

Thin, with cold blue eyes and long, tapering fingers, he was undoubtedly thoroughly familiar with his work. Jim watched him deal with smooth efficiency and admired the way in which he handled the turbulent crowd who wrangled over their bets.

"He's good, all right," the Ranger told Sullivan. "An old hand."

Toward midnight there was a row at the faro table. A big miner disputed the payment of a bet. The dealer, in a courteous, modulated voice, showed him where he was wrong but the miner did not want to be convinced. He began to bellow curses.

Jim Rance, sauntering toward the argument, saw the miner's hand suddenly flash to his belt and come up clutching a long knife. Exactly like a striking snake, the dealer's white hand darted forward, a stubby, double-barreled Derringer shot from his sleeve, spatted against his palm and roared. The miner reeled back, clutching his smashed wrist with reddening fingers. The dealer sat perfectly still, the second barrel of the Derringer cocked and ready.

Jim helped the wounded miner out and to a doctor. The dealer went on flipping the cards as if nothing had happened.

"Cold as ice, no nerves at all," Jim summed him up. "Yeah, he can handle the job all right."

A little later Sheriff Bart Dole entered the Black Ace. "More trouble, I hear," he greeted Sullivan. "Who was it did the shooting—that feller over there? Huh! he looks it! I'll just take him down to my

office and ask him a few questions. There's far too many quick-draw experts congregating in this county. Nope, you don't need to see Parker and put up bail—I'm not going to hold him. I just want to get a line on him for future reference. I'll send him back to you in half an hour."

"Bart's getting all-fired industrious of late," Sullivan grumbled to Jim as the sheriff and the dealer left the saloon. "The look he give you! Son, I've got a notion he don't like you at all!"

Jim agreed with Sullivan's surmise, but he didn't worry about it.

IN HIS office, after being sure that the shades were drawn and the doors locked, Sheriff Dole sat down and rolled a cigarette, while the dealer lighted a long black cigar.

"You played your hand very nicely," complimented the dealer. "It was thoughtful of that big lummox to provide such an excellent opportunity for us to get together. I see that you received my letter all right."

"Yes, it came day before yesterday, Mr.—"

"My name is Haskins—Charles Haskins; don't forget."

The sheriff repeated the name several times. "I'll remember it," he said. "Say, it seems to me I've seen you before."

"You have a good memory for faces," admitted Haskins. "It is close to ten years since you left Stillwater, is it not?"

The sheriff's face blanched to a sickly gray. Terror filmed his black eyes. His hand clutched at his gun butt.

"Wh-what are you talking about?" he blustered.

Haskins' face did not move a muscle. His cold gaze seemed to bore into the sheriff's brain and read his thoughts.

"You still had ten years to do when you went over the wall, didn't you, Dole?" he remarked. "Now don't try anything foolish. It wouldn't do you the least good. You are in no danger, so long as you play the game straight with me. But just remember I know who you are, and I have arranged that if anything—ah—unexpected and unfortunate should happen to me, the knowledge will pass to others. Now forget all that and give me a detailed report of conditions as they exist here at the present time. And by the way, who is that lookout at Sullivan's place, and what is he?"

Dole growled a curse. "Just a restless cowboy who rode into here a while back," he replied. "He's willing enough to be crooked but don't seem to know how. Garcia has used him on a few little jobs. I'm going to snarl his rope proper for him at the right time," he added vindictively.

Haskins was thoughtful. "Somehow he doesn't fit into the picture you draw," he said. "There's a steadiness about his eyes, and a way he has of looking at you, that is disconcerting."

"He doesn't count for anything," interrupted Dole. "Just a quick-draw artist with fast hands and a slow brain. Country's full of that kind. They never amount to much and they die young."

Haskins nodded absently. "Now as to conditions here . . ."

Less than half an hour later he reentered the Black Ace alone.

"I satisfied the sheriff that the fault was not mine," he reported to Sullivan, "and I was able to give a satisfactory account of myself."

"Fine," rumbled Sullivan. "Bart's always going off half-cocked and doing some damn fool thing. You're all right, feller. You get the job as long as you care to hold it."

Sheriff Dole, in the meanwhile, was having a rather painful interview with Miguel Garcia.

"We got to string along with him, I tell you," he declared. "We just can't handle it alone. Nope, wiping

him out won't put us on the long end. There's others in it besides him, remember, and they got things mixed so's our hands are tied. Our little agreement is off."

"Those others? Might it not be possible to get them here also?" the Mexican asked softly. "Then—"

He and the sheriff looked into each other's hard eyes with perfect understanding.

"It might work," muttered the sheriff. "But he's smart, I tell you. Mighty smart!"

Two days later the sheriff strolled into the Black Ace. "I heard from the marshal at Crater," he told Sullivan. "He gives that dealer of yours a clean bill. Says he's known favorably over there. Have him drop in and see me this evening and I'll tell him about it."

Sullivan passed the word to Haskins when the dealer came to work early that evening.

"You'll have time to run down there before you go on," Sullivan told him.

HASKINS went to the sheriff's office and without preamble plunged into the matter which had occasioned the interview.

"We've got to freeze that fellow Carney out," he declared tersely. "That's the danger point, that ranch of his. Any day he's apt to stumble onto something."

"Chances are he wouldn't know what it was if he did," deprecated Dole.

"Possibly," agreed Haskins, "but I don't care to take the chance. He must be gotten off that land, and without delay. You seem to have failed in your attempts. I'll try my hand. I understand he has notes at the local bank that fall due shortly."

That night Sheriff Dole sent a long telegram, dictated by Haskins, to New York. The message was in code. It was soon productive of results. Less than a week later, Jim met Rose Damrock in Alamita. The girl was blue and worried.

"It's Tom," she explained to Jim. "He can't sell his cattle."

"Can't sell 'em?" wondered the Ranger. "Why not?"

"We can't understand it," confessed the girl. "Orders he had were suddenly canceled. Two buyers with whom he talked told him that he is underbid. Another said that he had orders from his company not to buy from Tom under any conditions. Why the orders were issued he professed not to know. It looks as if somebody with a great deal of influence has deliberately closed the markets."

"Is it necessary for him to sell right now?" Jim asked.

"Yes," the girl replied. "He has notes that fall due in less than sixty days. If he cannot meet them, he

will lose his ranch, and if he can't sell his cattle he can't meet the notes. I wonder what in the world's back of it all?"

Jim wondered too. He patted her hand and told her not to worry, that things would straighten out, but he did not feel anywhere nearly so confident as he professed to be.

It was not unnatural that Sheriff Bart Dole, watching from a saloon across the street, should misinterpret Jim's friendly gesture. Ad Phelps, who stood beside the sheriff, did not reassure Dole with his jeering remark.

"Looks like that dark haired puncher is sort of shining up to your girl," said Ad. "She doesn't seem to hate him, either," he added with a leer.

Dole glared at his tormentor, but choked back his anger through necessity. "We got to get rid of that feller," he declared.

Phelps nodded. "I just got an idea," he said. "You know some woman you can trust to write a little note and then forget about it?"

CHAPTER XI

Drygulched

EARLY in the morning of the following day, Jim saw Carney. The young rancher was bitter and confident that he knew who was back of his trouble.

"Sure, it's the same bunch that has been cutting fence and running off my stock," he declared. "It's the big cattle owners. They couldn't scare us little fellers off, so they've decided to freeze us out. If they can close the markets to us they'll succeed, too. Most of us have notes which have to be met and the only way we can meet 'em is by selling stock when it's ready for market. I'm the first to catch it, but the others'll get theirs too. We're going to have a meeting and see if we can't figure some way to hit back at those horned toads."

Jim left the interview depressed. The situation was growing tenser all the time. A bloody range war was in the making and any trivial incident would be sufficient to touch off the fuse.

"The loose end of a rope's too good for the sidewinders who are responsible for all this," he said between set teeth. "I've a notion to take Bart Dole out into the brush and pistolwhip him till he squawls the truth 'bout things. If I was positive he really knows who's the big he-wolf and isn't just a hired man following out orders, blamed if I wouldn't do it!"

Jim went to work in a bad temper. Along toward midnight an undersized Mexican youth slipped through the swinging doors, sidled up to the Ranger and touched him on the elbow. Jim turned and eyed the boy questioningly.

"What do you want, *muchacho?*" he asked.

"I have ze writing for ze Senor Jim; you are heem, *si?*"

"Yeah, my name's Jim," the Ranger replied. "What do you mean by writing?"

By way of answering the boy slipped an envelope from inside his shirt and pressed it into the Ranger's hand.

"La senorita, she send eet," he announced. "I ride ver' fast from ze Lazy D."

Jim tore open the envelope. Inside was a single folded sheet of paper on which was written a few words in a neat feminine hand.

Please meet me early tomorrow afternoon where the Lazy D trail forks from the main Ojinago Trail. It is very important.—Rose Damrock.

"Now what's up?" muttered Jim. He turned to question the Mexican youth, but the youth had vanished. Evidently an answer was not expected.

"Guess Rose figured I'd come if I could," Jim decided. "Well, she guessed right."

He left word with Barrelshape Burks to call him early, and by noon of the following day he was riding swiftly along the Ojinago Trail toward the Lazy D range.

For some distance to the north of the fork, the main trail wound through scattering thickets of manzanita. Jim was riding past one of these thickets which grew to the edge of the trail when something hissed snakily through the air behind him. A close loop settled over his shoulders and was instantly jerked tight. He left the saddle as if he had taken wings, hit the ground hard, and for a moment lay half stunned. Running feet sounded in the brush and an instant later a dark face bent over him.

With a mighty wrench and twist, Jim managed to get one arm free. His hand streaked to his holster. A gun barrel thudded against his skull and knocked him back senseless in the dust. Another dark-faced man joined the first. Muttering to each other in Spanish, they bound the Ranger's wrists and ankles, caught his horse, which stood patiently a

little distance off, and draped his limp form across the saddle. They brought their own horses from the thicket, mounted and rode into the hills, leading the sorrel and its unconscious burden.

JIM came back to consciousness with a splitting headache and a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He opened his eyes, and closed them again quickly as pain stabbed through them. He waited a moment and then tried again. Gazing straight up, he could see the hazy blue of the afternoon sky. He was lying on his back on the ground.

With an effort that sent new spasms of pain through his pounding head, he turned it sideward and stared. Squatting beside a small fire over which was suspended a cooking pot were two men wearing the colorful garb of Mexican cowboys. One of them glanced in his direction, saw that he was conscious and grinned with a flash of white teeth in his dark face.

"A hard one to kill, that," he remarked in Spanish, which Jim understood perfectly.

"It would have been best for him to have died thus, without pain," remarked the other Mexican, a squat, broad shouldered individual with a cruel cast of countenance. *"El Capitan* thinks in terms of ant hills and heated irons, and he hates this one greatly."

"Si," agreed the other, "and it is most evil to be hated by *El Capitan."*

Lying with his eyes half closed, as if still dazed, Jim listened, thinking furiously the while. What had happened was painfully apparent. These men, lying in wait for him, had neatly roped him from his saddle, knocked him on the head and carried him somewhere. Now they were apparently waiting instructions from higher authority.

Who was *El Capitan,* the Chief, Jim wondered. Garcia? It was hardly probable. If not, then who? *El Capitan* hated him greatly, the squat Mexican said. There were but two men in the Basin, so far as he knew, who hated him greatly.

"Ad Phelps and Bart Dole are mixed up in this somehow," he surmised shrewdly. Suddenly lifting his head he shot an utterly unexpected remark at the two Mexicans.

"I'll bet *El Capitan* is left-handed."

The Mexicans stared at him with hanging jaws. *"Maldito!* How did you know?" gasped the tall one.

"Silencio!" hissed his squat companion, but Jim had learned what he wanted to find out. He sank back to the ground, grinning thinly, ignoring the black looks of the pair.

The Mexicans huddled together, muttering to each other. They cast glances at the sun, which was nearing the horizon. One of them lifted the cooking pot from the fire. The other man produced tin plates, spoons and a bag of *tortillas.* They dished meat stew from the pot and ate greedily.

When they had finished, they filled a plate for Jim, loosing his hands so he could eat and drink. He did not feel much inclination for food, but he forced himself to put it away. It brought a renewal of his strength and eased the ache in his head somewhat.

As soon as the plate was empty, the squat man bound Rance's hands again, and did a good job of it. Jim tried him with a question or two, but he got only grunts in reply.

The two muttered together again, cast another glance at the sun and then picked the prisoner up between them. Craning his neck, Jim could see that they were carrying him toward a dark opening that yawned in a nearby hillside. They entered the opening and their footsteps rang hollowly on stone. A gray darkness closed down.

Fifty paces or more, the pair halted, breathing heavily with the weight of their burden. They laid Jim on the floor and one of them struck a match. The quick flare showed him that he was in a narrow tunnel, the walls and roof of which were shored up by

heavy timbers. A square opening pierced the wall on one side. Through this opening they shoved him.

By the flare of a second match, he recognized the place as the tool room of an abandoned mine. He heard the creak of hinges and the thud of a closing door, then the rattle and click of a lock. A moment later the departing footsteps of the two Mexicans sounded. Jim was left alone with his thoughts, which were not pleasant. A vision of Ad Phelps' cruel face drifted before his eyes, and his mouth set in a hard line.

"That Mexican rascal out there wasn't talking through his hat when he mentioned ant hills and hot irons," muttered the Ranger, straining at his bonds.

QUICKLY enough, Jim discovered that the squat Mexican knew how to tie a knot. The more he struggled the tighter the ropes that bound him seemed to get. The only thing he achieved was cruelly cut wrists. With great difficulty he got his hands up to his mouth and tried to chew the cords. The hair rope resisted his teeth like strands of steel wire.

Finally he desisted and lay panting from the strain. For a long time he lay still, his body gradually numbing from his cramped position. He managed to roll over on his face in an effort to ease his aching muscles and something gouged him sharply in the breast.

For a moment he was at a loss as to what it was. Then abruptly he recognized the feel of the object. It was the metal match box in his shirt pocket. He remembered that it was nearly full of matches. A thrill of inspiration shot through his brain.

"It's a chance," he panted, nudging and groping with his bound hands, "not much of a one, but a chance!"

He began a long and painful struggle to get the match box out of the buttoned pocket. After what seemed an eternity of effort he succeeded. With a great sigh of relief he heard it tinkle on the rock floor. There followed another period of groping until he located it.

There was a handkerchief loosely knotted about his neck. He ducked and hunched until he got it over his head and dropped it to the ground. Then after another eternity of effort he got the match box open and fingered out a match. He scraped and scraped until the frail stick broke. He managed to pick up another match from the box and began all over again in his effort to strike a light.

He succeeded this time. The tiny flame flared up, flickered, wavered and seemed on the point of going out. Then it caught the wood firmly and blazed up. Jim dropped it onto the bunched handkerchief and struggled to get his bound wrists over the growing flame as the cloth caught fire.

Waves of pain flowed through his body as the fiery tongue licked against his flesh, but he set his teeth and endured the agony, strengthened by the smell of burning rope.

For what seemed endless hours the hot teeth of the blaze bit into his wrists, but all the time the hair rope was crisping and charring. As the flame died down, Jim put forth all his strength in a mighty effort. He felt a strand give, another. Abruptly the cord loosened and in another moment he was able to shake it free.

For several minutes he lay quietly on the cool rock floor, exhausted by pain and his tremendous exertions. Then he got the rope from his ankles. At first he could not stand, so cramped and numbed was he, but gradually the blood flowed painfully back into his limbs and he got to his feet.

There were matches left in the box and he struck one. He quickly realized that, although he was free of the ropes, he was still a prisoner in the rocky chamber. The door was of heavy planks firmly clamped together and it was securely locked on the outside. The cracks between the planks were not wide enough to enable him to reach through to the lock, even had he possessed the key. Striking

another match he turned his attention to the inside of the little room.

In the far end, leaning against the timbers that shored the roof, were picks, shovels and crowbars. There was also a coil of rusty chain among the implements.

Jim procured a crowbar and went to work on the door; but pry and wrench as he would, its solid construction resisted all his efforts. He dared not attempt to batter the planks loose, for if the Mexicans were sleeping in the entrance of the tunnel or near it, they would undoubtedly hear the repeated thuds and come to investigate. Setting the crowbar down, he leaned against the rock wall and racked his brains for a solution of the problem.

By the light of another of his matches, he examined again the little heap of tools. He fingered the rusty links of the chain. There was quite a length of it and it appeared to be in good condition.

"If I had a horse in here I could hook him onto this and pull that cross bar loose from the door," he muttered, grinning at his own folly.

The thought, however, set a string of ideas to working and he suddenly recalled something he had once seen in a railroad construction camp.

"It might work!" he exclaimed exultantly. "Now if I can just remember how the contraption was rigged up."

UNCOILING the chain, he fastened one end of it securely to an upright shoring timber. Then he wound the other end about the upper cross piece of the door, letting the chain hang loosely. Next he took a crowbar and twisted it in the slack of the chain until it stood upright with its point on the floor. In the loop formed by the slack about the upright bar he inserted the end of a second crowbar. Taking hold of the other end, he walked slowly about the upright bar, winding up the slack in the chain. In another moment the mighty leverage of a Spanish windlass was straining against the cross piece.

Jim heard the shoring timber creek and shudder. The rusty chain hummed and cracked.

"Wonder if she's going to hold?" he gasped, throwing all his weight against the horizontal bar. "Hope the chain doesn't break."

With a rending crash the cross piece ripped loose from the planks. Jim lost his footing and sprawled on the floor with the links of the sagging chain on top of him. He shoved them aside and leaped erect, still clinging to his crowbar. He groped his way to the shattered door, wrenched the planks aside and squirmed through the opening.

In the tunnel sounded cries and the thud of running feet. Jim shrank behind a shoring timber, gripping the iron bar. He sensed rather than saw a figure loom against the dim filter of light through the tunnel entrance. The crowbar whirled up and crunched down on a man's head. Then a gun roared almost in the Ranger's face and by the flash he saw the squat Mexican within arm's reach.

There was no time for a second blow with the bar. Jim dropped it and dived for the Mexican's legs. Down came the man on top of him, the gun blazed again and then his fingers clamped on a sinewy wrist.

Over and over they rolled, striking, kneeing, gouging. Snapping teeth grazed the Ranger's throat. A fist like a lump of iron crashed against his jaw. The wrist writhed and twisted in his grasp, trying to bring the gun to bear, but he grimly held on, groping with his free hand for the other's throat.

He found it and fastened steely fingers in the Mexican's flesh. The squat man dug his chin down and bulged the muscles of his neck. He hammered at the Ranger's face, kicked, and used his knees. Jim gave a mighty wrench and the gun dropped from the other man's hand.

At the same instant the Mexican tore his throat free and surged to his

feet. Jim reeled erect at the same instant, crouching back in the dark as the other rushed. His groping hands caught the Mexican about the thighs and with a mighty heave he hurled him over his head. He heard the dull thud of the man's body striking the rock floor, then a queer thrashing about like that of a chicken with its neck wrung. Crouching tense and ready, he listened for the other to renew the attack. But in another moment the tunnel was silent.

Sick, giddy, the Ranger stood up and struck a match. The taller of the two Mexicans lay in a huddled heap, his skull crushed like an eggshell. The other Mexican sprawled near him, his head lolling hideously to one side, his eyes glazed.

"Landed on his head and broke his neck," gasped the Ranger, breathing in great gulps.

In addition to his own empty holster, the squat man wore Jim's double cartridge belt. Jim ripped it free and buckled it about his own waist. Then he staggered from the tunnel.

Near the entrance he saw the Mexicans' horses, peacefully grazing. His own sorrel, still saddled and bridled, was tethered to a low branch. Jim pulled the knot loose and had just strength enough left to lift himself into the saddle.

"Maybe *El Capitan* will be coming up here to meet those jiggers," he mumbled, "but I sure am in no shape to meet him, or anybody else. Horse, go places!"

Reeling drunkenly, he gave the gelding his head. The golden horse moved slowly off through the brush.

Jim Rance recalled very little of that ride. He roused to take stock of his surroundings only when he saw the dawn light glinting on the creamy walls of the Bar C ranchhouse. The gelding's instinct had led him to where past experience assured him food and shelter were to be had.

Tom Carney dressed the worst of Jim's cuts and bruises, and put him to bed. Rance slept heavily for hours and awoke stiff and sore, but refreshed. Before riding to town he showed Carney the note the Mexican youth had handed him. Carney glanced at it and shook his head.

"It isn't Rose's writing," Carney declared positively. "Reckon they must have hired a dance hall girl or somebody to fix this thing up so it would be in a woman's writing. Now if you could just find that girl!"

"Uh-huh, and the chances are she wouldn't know who was back of it or what it was for," Jim said. "Those men are smart, all right, but they'll tangle their rope sooner or later. Crooks always do — and then we'll have a showdown."

CHAPTER XII

The Texas Ranger

UPON hearing what had happened to Rance, Sam Sullivan was profanely sympathetic. Jim had told the saloon keeper only as much as he deemed necessary.

"Feller on this kind of job always makes enemies," Sullivan declared. "Son, you got to watch your step."

Later in the evening, Sheriff Dole strolled in. He stared at Jim's battered face.

"Meet up with a catamount?" he asked.

"Nope," Jim told him. "Just a couple of hydrophobia skunks. Ever tangle with skunks, Sheriff?"

Dole muttered something unintelligible and left the saloon.

Two days later Jim found Barrelshape Burks squeaking with excitement when he came downstairs.

"That feller Carney, you know him, don't you?" asked Barrelshape.

"Uh-huh," admitted Jim, "why?"

"He's been arrested!"

"Arrested?"

"Uh-huh. Arrested for rustling. Sheriff's got him locked up in jail. Seems Ad Phelps, John Damrock's foreman, found a Bar C branded calf

following a Lazy D cow around. He swore out a warrant for Carney and Bart Dole arrested him, when he come to town, and locked him up."

Jim went to the jail immediately. A deputy was in charge there and allowed him to see the prisoner. Carney's red hair was fairly standing on end with anger.

"Of course it's a frame-up!" Carney yelped, hammering the iron bars. "It's just another move by those coyotes to cause me trouble. Anything to keep me in hot water till those notes fall due and the bank can foreclose. It's the oldest dodge in the cattle business — running somebody's brand on a stray calf and having it follow the cow around. The charge won't stand up a minute, once it comes into court."

"Judge Parker's out of town today," Jim told him, "but when he gets back tonight I'll talk Sam Sullivan into putting up bail for you and the judge'll turn you loose. Don't you worry."

"I wish you'd ride over to my place and tell the boys what's happened," Carney requested. "Tell 'em to move that trail herd into the north pasture and keep their eyes open. No telling what those skunks may try while I'm held here."

"Sure," agreed Jim. "I'll go right away. I'll try to get word to Miss Rose, too," he added.

Jim rode to the Bar C without delay. Wahoo Wilson and Bunty Brand, two riders, swore luridly when Jim told them what had happened. They were for riding to Alamita at once and taking their boss from the sheriff by force.

Jim dissuaded them. "You fellers just take it easy and look after things here. I'll get Tom turned loose tonight when the judge comes back. Also, it might not be a good idea to leave the ranch all by itself right now. This may be a trick to get everybody away so the conspirators can pull a fast one of some kind."

Jim knew that riding to the Lazy D ranch house was a risky undertaking, but he had promised Carney that he would get word to Rose Damrock. So when he reached the left fork of the trail, he turned into it.

He was riding through thick chaparral when he heard fast hoof beats on the trail ahead. He listened a moment and then pulled the sorrel to a halt and backed him into the growth. Loosening his guns in their holsters, he waited.

On came the unseen horse, drumming the trail with iron-shod hoofs.

"Rider sure is in a hurry," muttered Jim. "Doesn't seem to be but one of him, though."

AROUND a bend flashed the speeding horse. Jim gave a single look and urged the sorrel out of cover. The rider pulled to a sliding halt directly opposite the Ranger. It was Rose Damrock.

The girl wore no hat. Her hair was tossing wildly, her eyes dark with some hidden terror. She was gasping and her words tumbled out so incoherently that Jim could not understand what she was driving at. He cut her short.

"Snap out of it!" he ordered. "Stop yammerin' and talk sense. What are you trying to tell me?"

She sobbed convulsively, but calmed down and began to speak coherently.

"It's Tom," she panted. "He's in jail!"

"Yeah, I know." Jim nodded. "I was coming to tell you about it. There isn't anything to worry about. I'll have him out tonight. That charge won't stand up."

"It isn't that!" the girl almost screamed. "It's Ad Phelps. Don't you understand! Phelps has been stirring up people against Tom. A gang is riding to Alamita to take Tom from the jail and — and lynch him!"

"How do you know this?" Jim demanded.

"One of the *criados*, servants, at the house heard Ad planning it with some of the hands. He told my Mexican maid and the maid told me. They

left the ranch hours ago. Even now it may be too late!" She began to sob again.

Jim Rance turned the big sorrel. His face was bleak, his eyes cold as moonlight on frozen water.

"So long," he told the girl quietly. "I'm headin' for town."

"I'll ride with you!" she said.

"You can ride after me!" Jim told her grimly. "There isn't a horse in Texas that can keep up with Nugget when he really gets going!"

A single barked word and the great sorrel gathered his mighty muscles together and shot forward as if launched from a catapult. Jim Rance leaned over his glossy neck and the big horse began to race down the trail.

Faster and faster the hoofs spurned the hard trail. Jim leaned lower, the wind whistling in his ears. It ripped his wide hat from his head and sent it hurtling into the brush, but he gave it no heed.

An hour later the town of Alamita lay before Rance. Down a last slope, around a bend and the echo of his flying hoofs crashed back from the false fronts of the main street.

A crowd was assembled in front of the little jail. On the jail porch stood Sheriff Bart Dole, his hands raised in protest. A heavy gun sagged against his hip, but he made no move to draw it.

"You fellers are making a mistake," he was bawling. "It isn't right to interfere with justice. You ought to let the law take its course."

"We aren't interfering with justice!" shouted a voice from the crowd. "We're just handing it out! If you don't try to stop us, you'll be all right! Out of our way! We mean business, Sheriff!"

"There isn't anything I can do to stop you," replied the sheriff resignedly. "There's too many of you and you got me covered, but you're doin' this over my protest."

"Get that cow thief and string him up!" shouted the voice from the crowd. "Come on, boys!"

WHOOPING and yelling, the mob surged forward. A hand waved a coil of rope above their heads. Crashing through their ranks came a giant golden horse, blowing, snorting, spattered with sweat and foam. He slid to a hoof-clashing halt and a tall form swung to the porch beside the sheriff.

"You crooked faker!" rasped Jim Rance. One long arm shot out and an iron-hard fist crashed into Dole's face. He went down, dazed and bloody.

Jim Rance whirled to face the mob, which had paused in amazement. His blazing eyes ran over the gaping faces

and centered on the livid countenance of Ad Phelps, who was hovering on the outskirts.

The Texas Ranger's voice lashed out like a crackling whip of scorn. "Why don't you come up front, you monkey-faced misfit? Want these fellers to get all the blame when the showdown comes, eh? Try and get away with it!"

Sheriff Dole staggered to his feet, spitting out blood and broken teeth. "Who do you think you are?" he bellowed.

"Yeah!" shouted a big cowboy in the mob. "Taking up for a sneaking rustler. Who do you think you are?"

Jim's left hand shot forward. In his palm gleamed a silver star. His voice was like steel grinding on ice.

"I'm Jim Rance of the Texas Rangers! And I've got a trump for every trick you can play! Step up, boys, don't be bashful!"

His bloody face livid, his eyes starting from his head, Sheriff Dole reeled back against the building wall. The members of the mob stood frozen in grotesque attitudes, staring, muttering.

A Ranger! A Texas Ranger! There

was magic in the name. All too well they knew what the results of further violence would be. Bullets, swift and sure, to the hearts and brains of some. Certain vengeance upon all when the rest of Rance's company would ride in with flaming carbines through the Alamita Basin and collect the terrible price that must be paid for a Ranger slain.

Added to the grim prestige of those men of law and order was the dominant personality of the man who faced them. Jim Rance stood towering above them, eyes blazing, lean jaw set. His slim, sinewy hands were hooked over his cartridge belt. The black butts of the heavy sixes were shoved around to the front.

"Step up, boys, don't be bashful!"

But they were, decidedly, bashful. Even Ad Phelps, killer, Mexican bandit leader, gunman, moved back behind his men. Then Phelps turned and walked away. He went, and not alone. Like a sifting of sand on the desert's face, the mob melted away, shuffling off in twos and threes. Soon the space in front of the jail was empty.

Tall and straight, sunlight glinting on his black hair, the Ranger stood and watched them go. As the last of the mob turned the corner, a pinto pony clattered up to the jail and a sobbing girl flung herself into the Ranger's arms.

Jim patted her curly head and soothed her fears. "Tom's all right," he assured her. "The sheriff will keep an eye on him till I see Judge Parker and get him turned loose. The judge'll be here in a couple of hours. I wouldn't be surprised if the sheriff'd let you stay in there with Tom till the judge gets here, eh, Dole?"

Bart Dole's face was white and drawn, and a rage akin to madness filmed his black eyes, but he mumbled assent to the Ranger's suggestion and led Rose into the jail. Jim walked both exhausted horses until they cooled down a bit and then took them to a stable.

CHAPTER XIII

Black Gold

BART DOLE, the sheriff, also underwent an unpleasant interview in his office shortly after Judge Parker had released Tom Carney on bail provided by old Sam Sullivan. Haskins, the faro dealer at the Black Ace, stood before the sheriff and lashed him with words that stung like blows of a whip.

"No wonder you got fifteen years for a bungled robbery back in Minnesota!" Haskins snarled. "You haven't the brains of an idiot! You let that Texas Ranger come in here and prowl around for weeks and didn't even suspect what he is! Heaven alone knows what he's learned. 'Just a quick-draw artist with fast hands and a slow brain,' you said. I knew the minute I laid eyes on him that he wasn't what he seemed to be."

"Oh, I admit he fooled me!" exclaimed Dole. "What else can I do?"

Charles Haskins leaned forward and bored the sheriff with his cold eyes. "I'll tell you what you can do," he said softly. "You can get rid of him!"

"But how?" faltered Dole. "That feller's bad, and he knows all the answers."

"Be that as it may, he's got to be gotten rid of," repeated Haskins, "and the job is up to you."

Jim Rance went to see Miguel Garcia. A hush fell over the dingy saloon as the Ranger entered. Garcia was cringing over a table in the back. Jim wasted no words.

"Thirty-six hours to close your business up and move back to Mexico," he said. "I got enough on you to hang you high, but I'm giving you a chance. Show up this side of the Line again and I'll take you in. Get going!"

Without waiting for a reply Rance turned on his heel and left the *can-*

tina amid a well of silence.

"Garcia's dumb," the Ranger mused. "If I'd put him under arrest I'd never have got anything out of him. Now he'll try to get under cover and sooner or later he'll give something away."

Garcia did get under cover. He immediately went to Sheriff Dole, who sent him to Ad Phelps. A little later, wearing a beard that pretty effectually disguised him, he joined the Lazy D riders. The *cantina* passed to his head bartender who was Texas born and who, so far as anybody knew, had never mixed in the Alamita Basin feuds.

Jim quickly learned that the presence of a known Ranger made little change in the situation as it existed in the Basin. He met John Damrock on the street and had a talk with him. Damrock deplored the lynching attempt but was not at all convinced that Carney was innocent of the rustling charge.

"Nesters are liable to do anything," he declared, "and those fellers who have fenced range aren't any different from real nesters. We aren't going to have peace here till they are all driven away. Yeah, I'm thinking seriously of trailing along with Robinson and Russell when they pull out for New Mexico."

Carney and the other small ranchers were equally outspoken.

"Saving Tom that way was a good piece of work," one said, "but it just slowed those drygulchers up a bit, that's all. They're out to get us, and they'll do it if they can. They're just unprincipled."

Within the next week Jim got three complaints of wirecutting. A serious grass fire on the big Triangle Dot heightened the tension.

Old Sam Sullivan bewailed the loss of "the best lookout and trouble shooter I had ever had," but was pleased to learn of Jim's Texas Ranger connection.

"I knew you were somebody the first time I saw you," he declared. "Drop in any time you take a notion. Nope, you can't pay for a drink in here. Put away a barrel if you have a mind to, but keep your money in your pocket."

TOM CARNEY'S case came to trial, but Ad Phelps failed to put in appearance as witness for the prosecution and the action was thrown out of court.

"But I can't market my steers," Carney complained, "and those notes haven't got much more than six weeks to run, now."

Which was how the situation stood one lovely autumn day of gold-dusted blue skies as Jim Rance slowly rode up the narrowing valley which formed the Bar C range. Jim was still convinced that the solution of the Alamita mystery was to be found somewhere on Tom Carney's spread.

The hills were warrior monks in scarlet and gold marching along the skyline. The mountains to the south of the silver river veiled themselves in exquisite purple. Underfoot the yellow grasses rustled in a friendly wind. Everywhere were peace and beauty and fruitfulness.

"Looks like folks who lived in such a pretty country as this would be too busy appreciating it to go kicking up rows and making trouble for each other," mused the Ranger, letting the reins hang loosely on the sorrel's neck and enjoying the scene.

On toward the gaily appareled hills he rode, his keen eyes tirelessly searching for anything out of the ordinary. He passed another of the long, low domes that featured the valley and again he racked his brain for a clue to the elusive suggestion which the formation quickened in his memory.

He was farther up the valley now than he had ever been before, almost to the beginning of the hills, in fact. Near the lip of a wide, deep hollow a spring bubbled from under a shelf of rock. Jim pulled the sorrel to a halt.

"Here's where you get a drink, feller," he said.

Dismounting, he led the horse to the water. The cayuse thrust his nose into the crystal clear fluid and then jerked it out, blowing and sputtering. He rolled a reproachful eye at his master and sneezed explosively.

"What's wrong with you, now?" Jim asked. "Don't you want a drink?"

The sorrel snorted again, and tossed his head.

"All right, all right!" Jim told him. "You don't have to drink if you don't want to. I do."

Moving to the other side of the little pool, he knelt and placed his lips to the water. A moment later he was sputtering as vigorously as the sorrel had done.

"Well, I don't blame you," he said. "The stuff is as salty as a pickle tub!"

He sat back on his haunches and stared at the offending spring. Suddenly he sniffed sharply. "And what's the funny smell?" he wondered.

It was a pungent and elusive odor that the Texas Ranger could not at first identify. He moved away from the spring and caught a stronger whiff.

"Seems to come up around that cliff," he muttered, clambering over the rocks in the direction of a beetling wall that reared up starkly. A little later he rounded a huge boulder and stared at a dark opening in the face of the rock. It was a natural cave, he quickly decided, and from this cave came the odor.

"Reminds me of a can of axle grease," muttered the Ranger, peering dubiously into the dark opening.

Glancing about he noted a little clump of stunted piñons growing nearby. He strolled over to the grove and after a search found a rotten stump from which he wrenched a fragment of tinder-dry, resinous wood. He returned to the cave mouth, struck a match to the torch.

It smoldered for a moment, sputtered and burst into flame. Holding it high above his head, he entered the dark passage.

At first the gallery was narrow, but its width increased rapidly until he was unable to see the walls on either side. The heavy odor increased. He halted abruptly, digging his heels into the floor of the cave.

DIRECTLY in front of him the cave floor dropped away. He leaned over and stared down.

A smooth dark surface a dozen feet or so below reflected the torch light. He gagged from the nauseous fumes that drifted up from the sullen pool. For a moment he stared in bewilderment. Suddenly his breath caught in an excited gasp. He dropped to his knees and thrust the torch down as far as he could reach. For a minute or more he studied what lay in the pit, his excitement growing. Then he scrambled to his feet and hurried back toward the outer air.

"Suffering sandtoads!" he panted "No wonder they want to run Tom and everybody else out of the basin! No wonder they want to get control around here! Those domes! A salt spring! I remember it all now!"

In his ears rang the creaky voice of the professor of geology at the university, lecturing on the surface indications of petroleum:

"—where salt domes contain oil, sulphur at the surface, or sulphur springs, or even salt water springs indicate a possible oil pool beneath. Another surface indication is the presence of a low topographic mound."

Jim recalled that the topographic mounds were common throughout the Basin. He also remembered mention of salt and sulphur springs. Another statement of the professor's came to mind.

"Surface pools are sometimes found. They are the seepage from vast underground reservoirs. The oil, under intense pressure, makes

its way up through the rocks from great depths."

Jim Rance sat on a boulder and stared down the valley. The discovery was so vast and far-reaching in its possibilities that it numbed his mind at first.

"Lucky there wasn't much of a gas pocket formed in that cave," he muttered. "If there had been, my light would have set it off and I'd have been blown clear on through Judgment Day."

For some time he sat thinking. Finally he mounted and rode swiftly for the Bar C ranch house.

"But what am I going to do about it?" asked the bewildered Carney after Jim had related his find.

The Texas Ranger thought for several minutes. "The thing for you to do," he counseled at last, "is to drill a well. If you can get a genuine flow of oil, your troubles are over. You won't have to hunt for money to pay off those notes—it'll just naturally come to you without the asking."

"But I can't drill a well," objected Carney. "It takes a lot of money to drill an oil well. You got to have derricks and engines and all sorts of thinks."

"No you don't," Jim disagreed. "I can show you a system that isn't at all expensive. Feller, didn't you ever see a couple of jiggers drill a water well? You can drill an oil well just the same way. Give me a pencil and a piece of paper."

For several minutes he figured on the paper. He passed the result to Carney. "That's how much I estimate it'll set you back," he stated. "Can you swing that?"

Carney studied the amount. "Yeah," he admitted, "I can swing that all right."

"All you need is a few tools and some casings and such to use the spring pole method," Jim told him. "Hand me that pencil again and I'll make out a sort of list of what you'll need. Ride to the railroad town with it and have a talk with a hardware dealer there. He can give you a proper lineup. Have the stuff shipped to the railroad town and bring it over here in a couple of wagons. Don't lose any time about it. I got a great big hunch that you can strike oil by that salt spring mighty close to the surface. The spring pole method will work fine for a shallow well and you ought to get a showing before those notes fall due. Get going, feller."

Wilson and Brand were called in, cautioned as to strict secrecy and told what was in the wind.

"Gosh," said Wahoo, "I never rode herd on a flock of oil wells, but I'll try anything once. Maybe we can squirt out enough so's I won't all the time be having to ride to town with a can to keep the lamps going. That'll help some."

CHAPTER XIV

The Raid

QUICKLY Jim rode back to town with his mind working a thousand revolutions a minute. He knew now why the mysterious individuals mentioned by Dole and Garcia desired to clean out the Alamita Basin, but he still did not know who they were.

"No sense in cracking down on the small fry," he decided. "Chances are I got enough on Dole and Garcia and Phelps to jug them right now, but if I did the chances are the big he-wolfs of the pack would slide from under. Nope, I'll wait till my loop's wide enough to drop over the whole herd. I got a hunch that when Tom's well comes in and they see that the cat's out of the bag they'll do somethin' to tip their hand. Crooks always distrust each other and start to fight when their plans go wrong. Just like cats tied together."

Carney had luck getting the needed tools. In less time than Jim had dared hope, the wagons loaded

with them rumbled up the Bar C valley. Jim chose a spot with care, near where the salt spring bubbled from the rocks. He proceeded to set up his spring pole drill.

A slender and springy pole about thirty feet long, its thick end heavily weighted with stones and buried in the ground, was passed across a fulcrum at an angle of about thirty degrees, so that its tapered end came vertically above the spot he had chosen for the well to be drilled.

The drilling bit and the steel rods to which the bit was fastened were attached by means of a swivel to the end of the spring pole, with the fulcrum so placed that the weight of the tools balanced the spring of the pole.

A short piece of iron pipe, or casing, was driven into the ground to guide the tools and insure a vertical hole. Crossed handles were clamped to the top of the drilling bit at a convenient height above the ground.

Wahoo Wilson and Bunty Brand took hold of the cross handles and raised and lowered the bit, turning it at the same time. The spring of the pole greatly eased the labor and in itself raised the tools about two feet with each upward thrust of the pole. With each downward thrust the heavy bit bored deeper into the ground. Tom Carney kept the hole wet with water from the spring.

"It's just like churning butter," chuckled Wahoo, "only you keep knocking the bottom out of the churn and you don't get any butter."

When the hole became clogged with the drillings they pulled out the tools and substituted a small cylinder with a simple dart valve at the bottom. This was churned up and down in the hole a few times and then withdrawn, bringing the cuttings up to the surface. As the hole deepened, additional lengths of casing were driven down into the ground.

"The Chinese used to get down a thousand feet this way," Jim told Carney.

"You aren't expecting us to go on through to China, are you?" asked Bunty.

Day after day went by and the hole steadily progressed. A depth of fifty feet was attained, and still the heavy drill bit into the earth. They struck a layer of rock and churned slowly through it. Water seeped in from time to time and had to be bailed out. The gassy smell grew stronger.

Jim Rance spent much of his time in the vicinity of the operation. So far as he knew, the business had been successfully kept secret, but he was taking no chances.

And then one day, unknown to Jim or the drillers, a dark-faced, bearded ranchhand rode across the hills toward the Bar C valley. From a wooded height he watched the activity by the salt spring. Then he wheeled his horse and rode swiftly back the way he had come. That night Sheriff Bart Dole had a visitor.

Dole got word to Haskins, and the faro dealer came to his office as soon as his night's work was done. Dole was shaking with anger and apprehension. In a few profane sentences he relayed the information Miguel Garcia had brought him.

Haskins sat perfectly still for minutes, his face white, his eyes cold and glittering. Then he began to speak, tersely, with grim finality.

"It's the only way," he told Dole. "They've got to be wiped out, all three of them. That Texas Ranger, too. Just what I feared has happened. In some manner they stumbled onto that seepage and understood what it meant. They are trying to bring in a well.

"Once they do that we are sunk. You won't be able to lease a foot of land in the Basin without paying an exorbitant price for it. Get hold of Phelps and have him handle those three. I'm going to send for Brunner and Flint. I don't dare wait any longer.

"I'll have them pick up what land

they can without delay. You say you think Damrock will sell that hill section? I learned that he has acquired title to his entire range."

STEADILY the well continued to drive deeper and deeper. Carney and his aids worked long hours every day. The lust of the treasure hunt had gripped them and they grudged the time necessary for food and rest.

"It's just as bad as the gold fever," said Wahoo. "Once you get it there isn't anything else in the world that counts. Why if a pretty girl came along right now I wouldn't even look at her."

"And that's sure saying something," sighed Bunty. "Bear down on those handles, feller! Bear down!"

Perched on a cliff overlooking the scene of operations, Jim Rance searched the valley with keen eyes. He was there every day, although the well drillers did not know it. Jim was playing a hunch.

"I believe we've kept this dark," he mused, "but you never can tell. If we haven't, something will happen very soon. There isn't any doubt but what the sidewinders who have been trying to run folks out of the Basin know about this seepage, and it stands to reason that they keep an eye on it. If they do, they're bound to see what's going on here, and when they do they'll act. Question is, just how?"

Rolling a cigarette, he smoked thoughtfully, glancing down the winding valley from time to time.

Abruptly the cigarette was forgotten. He instinctively reached up and pinched out the glowing end. Then he sat perfectly still, Winchester rifle cradled in his lap.

A band of men was riding up the valley. Jim counted seven all told. They were still too far away to recognize faces, but they were riding swiftly. He glanced down at the busy drillers. Carney and his men could not see the approaching horsemen because of the contours of the valley floor. They were intent on their work.

Smiling thinly, Jim Rance stretched out on his stomach, resting the barrel of the rifle across a rock. He snugged the stock against his cheek and waited.

On came the riders, slowing down, bunching together. Jim could see the gleam of rifle barrels. One broad-shouldered figure in the lead had a familiar look.

"And if that jigger riding beside him isn't that rat-faced wire-cutter, Squinty, I miss my guess," muttered the Ranger.

The drillers were still sheltered from view by a thicket and an outcropping of rock.

"But let those men once catch sight of 'em and they'll be so bogged down with lead they'll sink the ground," Jim told himself, cuddling the rifle stock. "Gents, you are close enough!"

The rifle barrel steadied, his eyes glanced along the sights. The raiders ducked and yelled as a heavy slug screeched over their heads. Jim sent the next one closer. He levered a fresh cartridge into the chamber of his rifle and waited. Glancing down, he saw Carney and his boys grab their guns and duck for cover. The raiders came to a halt. Then the broad-shouldered leader yelled a command and they thundered forward.

Jim Rance wasted no more cartridges in warnings. Face set like stone, slim hands steady, he glanced along the rifle sights. His finger curled on the trigger. Again the rifle roared. The broad-shouldered leader threw up his hands and slewed sideways from the saddle. Another crashing report and Squinty, the wire-cutter, went down. A third man howled with a smashed shoulder.

That was enough. The remainder of the band jerked their horses about and fled madly back down the valley, the wounded man reeling drunkenly in his saddle. They left behind two

riderless horses and two huddled forms in the grass.

Jim shouted to Carney and his men and got a reply. He untied his horse from where it was hidden in a thicket and rode down the long slope flanking the cliff.

"Come along," he shouted to Carney. "There's a couple of punctured gents down here who need attention."

THEY found Squinty first, stone dead, a blue hole between his eyes. A little farther on a dark-faced, bearded man lay in a clump of grass. He was still breathing and opened his eyes as Jim bent over him.

"I told you to stay in Mexico, Garcia," the Ranger said softly.

Miguel Garcia looked up into Rance's bronzed face. "Yeah, I'd ought to done it—I never did have no sense."

A single glance at the Mexican's wound told Jim that he was dying. He bent closer, lifted Garcia's head.

"You haven't got long to stay, feller," he said. "Might as well come clean before you go."

Garcia coughed chokingly. A spasm of pain distorted his dark face. He breathed in shuddering gasps.

"I have not much to tell," he panted. "You know about the oil. That's why we wanted folks out. Bart Dole and Phelps sent me to clean you fellers. Ad used to run the Zorrila gang in Mexico—he's wanted. Dole did time back East. The feller who found this oil, long time ago, the big feller what's runnin' the show is—is—here."

"Who is he?" urged the Ranger. "What's his name?"

Garcia coughed appallingly, his chest swelled, his tortured body writhed and heaved. A thin red froth flecked his pallid lips. He made a final mighty effort.

"C-Cartwright's his right name," he gasped. "Out here he calls himself —calls—himself—"

Blood suddenly bubbled in his throat, drowning the words. He retched, shuddered, stiffened out and relaxed. His eyes grew bright and fixed.

Jim Rance swore bitterly between set teeth. He placed a handkerchief over Garcia's face, and stood up.

"Passed out just as he was going to tell me what I most wanted to know," he said wearily to Carney. "Well, we're sure tightening the loop on Dole and Phelps but the jiggers we really want are still hidden. Glad to learn the big boss is here on the ground, anyhow. Maybe he'll tip his hand. Tom, you better hire somebody you can trust to sit up on that rock with a rifle, just in case. I don't figure they'll try anything more like this, now that they know our eyes are open, but it doesn't pay to take chances. And I've got to be on the move from now on."

CHAPTER XV

Flowing Riches

VERY quietly, two well-dressed strangers arrived in Alamita. One was fleshy, with a round face that gave not the least impression of softness. His eyes were cold, his mouth tight The other was tall and angular, with a large head scantily covered with graying hair. He was clean-shaven, and his eyes were filmy. He spoke seldom, and usually from one corner of his mouth.

The pair put up at the Grand Imperial and asked questions. They hired a rig and drove to the Lazy D ranchhouse. Damrock was at home and the strangers immediately plunged into the matter that had occasioned their visit.

"I don't see what you want of those hills," Damrock said after listening to their proposition as expounded by the fleshy man, "but I'm willing to sell, if the price is right."

"It is merely an investment on our part," the fleshy man, who gave his name as Brunner, replied. "We believe the day will come when the timber in this region will prove valuable. I am being very frank with you, Mr. Damrock, because we are willing to pay a fair price for the land. As you remarked, its value at present is negligible. It may never increase, at least not in the course of our lifetime, but we are taking that chance. For instance, if a railroad should be built in the vicinity we would make a profit from the investment."

"Uh-huh, there's lots of ways for somebody to get rich," admitted Damrock. "I suppose one thing is about as apt to happen as the other."

An hour later Flint and Brunner drove away, the deed for the hill section reposing safely in Brunner's pocket.

"Some people are so honest it's unpleasant to deal with them," remarked the fat man. "That old fellow is convinced the stretch of land is very nearly worthless, but he made no attempt to capitalize our desire to acquire it. He frankly admitted that he considered the price we offered to be in excess of its value."

"Uh-huh," admitted Flint. "That one was easy, and it was the important one, but I've a notion others won't be so easy to handle. There are some hard characters in this country, Brunner. What other owners have cleared their titles?"

"We are not so soft ourselves," commented the fat man.

WHEN Rose came in from a ride, Damrock told her of what had occurred.

"Those Easterners must be crazy," he concluded. "The railroad won't come through that way! Why, there isn't any more chance of a railroad coming through those hills than there is of me taking singing lessons! I just picked up some easy money, that's all."

To the old cattleman's surprise, his daughter did not agree with him. "Easy money is generally hard money in the end, Dad," she said. "I can't help but think there is something of value in those hills that you have overlooked. I wish I had seen those two men."

Due to her father's prejudice, she had not talked with Tom Carney since shortly before the drilling of the well started.

"Dad is old and I don't like to worry him needlessly," she had said. "It will only be a little while now, dear. We can afford to consider him that much. It's going to be shock enough to him when I marry you."

Carney had reluctantly agreed and Rose knew nothing of what was going on at the Bar C. Carney, incidentally, wished to keep it as a joyous surprise for her when the well came in.

Several days passed, and in little more than a week Carney's notes at the bank would fall due. The young rancher was worried. Jim Rance, still vainly searching for the leader who was stirring up trouble in the Basin, rode down to cheer him up. He found Tom and his boys still driving the well, which had now reached the respectable depth of nearly a hundred feet.

"We're going to meet ourselves coming back, first thing we know," declared Bunty, wiping the sweat from his face with his grimy shirt sleeve. "Say, I know just how a woodpecker feels, only I'm not using my nose."

Jim sniffed energetically. "My nose says the gas smell is getting stronger," he commented.

"We been drilling through almighty hard rock for the past three days," Carney commented. "Feller, that don't look so good to me."

Rance's dark brows wrinkled in thought. "I wish I could recollect all I learned about oil in school," he said. "Somehow or other I got a feeling that hitting hard rock so deep means something."

UP AND down surged the long rope which led to the drilling bit far underground. The faint thud of the bit on the subterranean stone slithered up the dark hole. The rope rose and sank with monotonous regularity.

Suddenly it surged far down, bending the spring pole until it cracked alarmingly.

"We cut clear on through," remarked Wahoo.

Jim Rance leaped from the timber on which he sat.

"Listen!" he exclaimed.

Far down in the bowels of the earth sounded a hollow rumble. It increased to a rushing roar that grew in volume.

"What's happening?" asked Carney, in alarm.

Jim let out an excited yell. "Run, you jugheads!" he bellowed. "Get in the clear! The well's coming in!"

Carney and Bunty and Wahoo weren't certain what it was all about, but Rance's tone admitted of no argument. They sprinted away from the hole as fast as their legs would carry them, Jim urging them to greater efforts.

Behind the fleeing quartet sounded a prodigious crash. Glancing over their shoulders they saw rope and drilling tools flung out of the hole and high into the air. After the disgorged tools came a hissing black column that soared up for many feet before it broke in a feathery plume and rained in a pattering flood on the ground. Jim gave a long yell of exultation.

"There she is!" he whooped. "There's your black gold! She's a gusher as sure as you're born! Look at her go!"

Higher and higher soared the plume of oil as the hole cleared of debris and the tremendous force of the imprisoned gas drove the liquid to the surface. A dark stream began to flow down the steep side of the great hollow. Jim chuckled gleefully.

"See why I told you to drill right there?" he shouted above the uproar. "See? That hollow makes a natural reservoir. You won't lose a barrel of your flow. Before the hollow is filled, the chances are she'll quiet down till you can cap her. Then you can draw the oil off with a pump. Get going to town with the news, feller, and send orders for proper drilling machinery, plenty of it. You're starting more wells right away."

Carney rode to town. Most of the town rode back with him. Included was the president of the local bank, who approached him with a broad smile.

"About those—ah—notes, Mr. Carney," the president said. "There will be no difficulty in securing an extension. Also," he added, "if you are in need of money for your development it will be available. Our institution would greatly appreciate your business."

When the news reached the Lazy D and John Damrock, his daughter, with admirable forbearance, refrained from saying, "I told you so!"

The great hollow very nearly filled with black gold by the time the flow diminished enough to permit capping the well. Other reservoirs were in the course of construction.

The news ran like wildfire the length and breadth of the Basin. It was flashed to the outer world and the wide valley became the scene of feverish activity. It was the gold rush of Forty-nine and the silver days of the Seventies all over again.

Men poured into the Basin from all parts of the country. Everywhere wildcat wells were drilling. Geologists studied the formations and prepared the way for scientific drilling. Almost overnight, Alamita changed from a straggling cow village to a roaring, brawling boom town. Money flowed like water. Men lost all sense of proportion.

Old Hump Ferguson, who had once "halfsoled" the seat of his pants with leather so they would last longer, leased a portion of his land for thirty thousand dollars.

"I reckon I can afford to buy a new pair of pants and wear 'em straight," said Hump, when the check was handed to him.

When Cale Robinson's first royalty payment came in he invested part of it in champagne. He opened a bottle of it without first cooling it and nearly blew the roof off his shack. Cale was going to shoot the saloonkeeper for selling him inferior liquor.

A WELL owner, soiled, greasy, with clay-caked boots and a week's growth of whiskers, rolled into the foremost hotel of a neighboring town and demanded "the best room in the house." The clerk took a look at boots and whiskers and told him that all rooms were taken.

"What's the hotel worth?" asked the oil man.

"Oh, about ten thousand dollars, I should say," replied the clerk.

"All right," said Whiskers, pulling a roll from his pocket that would have choked Jonah's whale, "I'll buy her and turn somebody out!" Which he did. He spent the next week in the bridal suite, roaring drunk and buying drinks for all comers.

Derricks sprang up like magic. The thud of drill bits and the panting of engines sounded day and night. Well after well came in. The price of land soared. Farmers and small ranchers who, six months before, would have jumped at a chance to sell for any price now laughed at would-be purchasers and held out for still more money. Men slept on billiard tables, on floors, in tents, under the stars. Everywhere was joyous excitement, speculation, investment.

A long line of tall derricks supplanted the puny springpole that had brought in the first well for Tom Carney. And along the top of the cliffs that fringed the Bar C range on either side were other strings of derricks. These belonged to the Great Western Oil Company, owned and operated by two eastern gentlemen by the names of Brunner and Flint. Several of their wells were producing moderately.

CHAPTER XVI

Death Strikes

CASUALLY Jim Rance paused for a chat with old Sam Sullivan. Sam was supervising the construction of a huge new saloon and dance hall. He hoped to open for business within a week.

"Remember that fellow Haskins?" Sam asked. Jim nodded. "He left me a while back to go to work for the Great Western. He was a top-notch dealer and he seems to be just as good in the oil business. I hear tell they've made him general manager of their outfit. He's just about handling the whole business, Tod Hunter says."

"I always thought he looked capable," Jim admitted, "but he's a cold proposition. I don't believe I ever saw a feller handle a short gun quicker than he did that first night he worked for you. Did Dole ever give him any more trouble?"

"Nope. Bart and he got to be pretty good friends. Bart goes over to Great Western headquarters to visit him regularly. Funny feller. I never could figure him out. Tod Hunter—Tod's postmaster, you know—told me that he used to get lots of mail from New York."

"Huh? What would he be getting mail from New York for?" Rance wondered.

"Don't know, but he got it."

Jim gave little thought to the fact that Charles Haskins received mail from New York but the incident set up a train of ideas in his mind.

"Think I'll have a little powwow with Hunter," he decided.

"Benson Cartwright?" repeated the old postmaster in answer to Jim's question. "Yeah, I have heard that name recently. Let's see, now—

Benson Cartwright! By gum! I have heard of it, or saw it!"

He knit his bushy white brows and pondered. Suddenly his wrinkled face lighted up.

"Sure I remember now," he said and chuckled. "I knew I would. I got a powerful memory for a man my age, son. There's mail for a Mr. Benson Cartwright come here in care of the Great Western Company. Their carrier picks it up when he gets the company mail. Some comes most every day."

Jim left the post office feeling exultant. The chase was narrowing. If Benson Cartwright was an employee of the Great Western it should be comparatively simple to single him out.

"Once I get the jigger himself cut out it ought to be easy to tie him up with what's been happening," he reasoned. "I've pretty well got Dole and Phelps roped and hogtied, if they only knew it. I reckon I can get a confession out of one or the other when the time comes."

He quietly investigated the Great Western and drew a blank. Nobody by the name of Cartwright was employed there.

"Maybe one of the big bosses, Brunner or Flint, is Cartwright using a false name," he speculated.

A long telegram to New York, requesting information on the two, brought a reply which conclusively established that Flint and Brunner, brokers and dealers in mine and oil properties, had always been Flint and Brunner. A query relative to one Benson Cartwright brought the information that Cartwright was a broker with a Wall Street office, reputedly wealthy, a resident of the city for several years past and of good reputation. The present whereabouts of Mr. Cartwright were not known.

"Well, if he isn't there, maybe he's here—things certainly point that way," Jim concluded.

The completion of Sam Sullivan's new Black Ace saloon marked a gala day in Alamita. Jim Rance, strolling along the main street as the sun sank in scarlet splendor behind the Sienegas, marveled at the roaring city which had replaced the quiet little cattle town of but a few months before. Brick and steel and plate glass now stood where shacks and adobe had formerly lined the street.

THE street itself swarmed with a jostling, swirling, color-splashed crowd. Light streamed from the yellow window squares as the night closed down. Song, music, and the roar of many voices soared to the silver glory of the stars. As far as the eye could reach along the prairie and the hills, the glare of drilling boilers outlined the gaunt, spidery forms of the derricks against the outer dark. The clank and thud of machinery shattered the silence and set the wondering coyotes to yipping louder than ever did the bawl of steer or the song of night hawk.

But in the town neither grind of drill bits nor plaint of the prairie wolf was heard. They were drowned by the whine of fiddles, the thrum of guitars, and the spattering whirl of voices.

Inside the dance halls, boots thumped and high heels clicked. Laughter and jest and what passed for song boiled through the swinging doors. The saloons were crowded, men packing the bars three deep. Cards slithered one against the other. Roulette wheels clattered. Dice clicked and bounded across the green cloth like spotty-eyed devils Gold chinked and silver gleamed.

Perspiring bartenders knocked the necks from bottles and gushed the contents into glasses that impatient customers pounded on the mahogany. The sawdust on the floor was sodden with spilled whiskey, and as the night wore on it was splashed red with spilled blood. Steel outglittered the gold. Gun smoke mingled with the swirling clouds of

tobacco incense.

Alamita roared and thundered under the blazing net of stars as lust and passion black as the oil that gushed from the earth's dark depths were unleashed and given full sway.

The white-faced gamblers reaped a harvest of gold that flowed across their tables. So did the reeking bars. So did the women of the dance halls, who clutched it eagerly in the early evening and flung it away in mad abandon as the wild night wore on.

Wilder and wilder! A night of nights! Not even the roaring gold camps had known such nights as this! Wealth was flowing from the earth and men were growing rich so fast they could not invent ways quick enough to spend the money. But they tried!

The dance floors were a bewildering kaleidoscope of contrasts. Oil-soaked woolen shirts pressed against shimmering silk. Muddy boots stamped beside dainty French heels. Cowboys in flaring chaps and gay shirts danced with dark-eyed senoritas. Mexicans in velvet trousers and flowered jackets moved gracefully through the crowd. Even an occasional Indian swathed in a red or blue blanket, perhaps with the eagle feather slanting low in his oiled hair, appeared at times.

In all the turmoil, calm, aloof, observant, moved the tall figure of Jim Rance. Twice his presence stopped a killing. An incipient riot that threatened to become serious was quelled by a few quiet words.

However, Jim paid little attention to the turbulence about him. Policing the town was a job for the local authorities, only they didn't seem to be on the job.

"I'm not here to interfere with the boys having a little quiet fun," he told himself. "Let them enjoy themselves. After all, a Texas Ranger isn't a town marshal."

He had a drink now and then with casual acquaintances, took a whirl or two at roulette and chaffed with the dance hall girls. Some time after midnight he dropped into Sam Sullivan's new Black Ace.

The Black Ace was Alamita's show place. Here was the biggest and noisiest crowd, the longest bar, the finest dance floor. All the games were going full blast. A Mexican orchestra provided music. So many couples were on the floor they could hardly move about.

Brawny arms hoisted a girl to the top of a table. She was slim and tall, with tawny hair and great dark eyes. Her mouth was a scarlet splash, her skin was ivory. In her the hot blood of Mexico and the poise of the North combined to form a bewildering witchery.

Throwing back her head, she burst into song. She had a voice that was clear and full, exquisitely toned.

A HUSH fell over the crowd. Through the big room rang the glorious golden voice. The muted violins and the mellow guitars sobbed softly. The song ended on a last silvery note. The girl on the table stood for a moment with white hands outflung. Suddenly she laughed. Her flashing black eyes swept about the room as if seeking somebody.

Her glance fell on the tall Ranger standing only a few feet from the table. With another laugh she hurled herself from the table top, straight into his arms.

"Dance with me, tall senor," she said.

"Why not?" Jim answered, setting her on her feet and throwing a long arm about her trim waist.

Tall as she was, her sun-colored hair came but to his shoulder. Her little hand against his dark coat was waxy white. Glorious in youth and grace and supple strength, they drifted across the dance floor.

The girl danced like a leaf in a vagrant breeze. Her feet seemed barely to touch the floor. She glanced up into his eyes, a hint of mockery in her own and more than a hint of calculation.

Little by little they drifted to the

outside of the floor, where it was less crowded. They passed and repassed an open window which looked onto a dark alley.

They were directly opposite the window when the girl, with surprising strength, tore herself from Jim's grasp and leaped back. For a moment he was rigid with astonishment. Then he hurled himself sideward and down as a heavy gun roared outside the window. His keen eyes had caught the glint of shifting metal just in time. He was on his feet in a single lithe ripple of movement, big Colt leaping from its holster.

With a scream like a wounded wildcat, the girl hurled herself upon him. Jim lunged for the gleaming knife as it swooped down, and caught it by the blade. The razor edge bit into his hand. Blood poured down his arm, but he grimly held on while the girl writhed and twisted and tugged to free the blade.

With all his strength the Ranger strove to wrest the knife from her. The reeking blade slipped through his torn flesh and he reeled back. The girl sprang after him, weapon flung high, just as the unseen gun roared again. Her angry scream changed to a shriek of agony and she plunged forward onto her face.

Jim leaped for the window, Colt streaming fire. He thought he heard the patter of swift feet and sent shot after shot in the direction of the sound. Then he whirled back to the girl, who lay in a huddled moaning heap.

Pandemonium reigned in the big room. Women stared, men cursed and shouted. The bartenders, sawed-off shotguns in their hands, bawled for order. Old Sam Sullivan roared like an angry bull.

Jim picked up the moaning girl, shouldered his way through the gibbering, questioning crowd and headed for the little back room that was Sullivan's office. Old Sam banged the door in the faces of those who sought to crowd in after him.

"Stand by this door with a scatter gun," he ordered his head bartender.

There was a couch in the room. Jim laid the moaning girl upon it and swiftly examined her wound. He shook his head at Sullivan, who nodded agreement.

"Just a matter of minutes," said the old saloon keeper.

THE girl heard him, and understood. Terror filled her dark eyes.

"A *padre!*" she moaned. "Send for a *padre!* I can't die this way!"

"Sorry, ma'am," Jim told her gently, "but there isn't any priest in this town."

The girl cried out wildly. "I can't die this way!" she sobbed. "I c-can't!"

The Ranger bent close and his strange green eyes were all kindness.

He said gently, "Maybe it might help some if you told who it was put you up to getting me killed."

"No! no!" she gasped. "I mustn't —I mustn't!" Then, almost deliriously she babbled a name, and an entreaty.

"Bart! Come to me, Bart! Please come to me! I'm dying, Bart!"

Jim Rance's eyes were still filled with pity, but his face had turned bleak and cold.

"So it was Bart Dole who put you up to this? It was he who used you this way?"

The dying girl cried out again. "Oh, you mustn't blame Bart! You mustn't! It was that—that devil! He knows Bart escaped from prison! He holds it over him! Bart couldn't help himself!"

"Who?" urged the Ranger. "Tell me who? It might help Dole. Who is back of all this?"

Words seeped between the graying lips, faint, gasping words. Jim and Sullivan listened closely.

"Cartwright!" breathed the girl. "Benson Cartwright."

Jim stood up. He spoke quietly to Sullivan. "See if you can find Dole and bring him to her before she passes out. Don't let him know she

gave him away. He need never know for that matter. What she said stays between you and me."

The girl's dimming eyes looked into his gratefully. "I'm—I'm glad—it—didn't happen!" she breathed. "You're—you're good!"

The dark eyes closed. A faint sigh fluttered between her parted lips. A calm majesty stole across her lovely face and rested there.

"Never mind about Dole, Sam," Jim told Sullivan, who was just hurrying back into the room. "Have somebody notify the coroner and undertaker."

That night the Great Western Company brought in a gusher.

CHAPTER XVII

Rustlers' Finish

HIS wounded hand dressed, Jim went to his room to rest and to think. He wondered who had done the actual shooting in the attempted murder. No signs had been found in the alley back of the saloon to show that his shots had taken effect. Sullivan's messenger had located Sheriff Dole in a poker game. The other players said he had been there all evening.

Dole came and looked at the dead girl, showing little feeling other than annoyance.

"Yeah, I know her," he admitted. "She used to work for me in the Alhambra. She was a spitfire and always was into trouble of some sort. You say she asked for me before she passed out? Did she say anything else?"

Jim came to the conclusion that it was doubtless Ad Phelps or some member of his outfit who handled the gun.

"And now I know pretty well who wrote that fake note that was supposed to have come from Rose Damrock," he said and nodded. "Well, looks like I got 'em on the run, the way they're trying to cash me in, but I sure got to watch my step!"

The Great Western gusher was a world beater. For several days it was the talk of the valley. Then suddenly the flow ceased. So did the flow of the other Great Western wells. Prodigious excitement ensued. Wild rumors flew about: The field was exhausted; a like fate would soon overtake the other wells in the Basin; the bubble was about to burst. All the while the Bar C wells in the valley directly below the Great Western property continued to flow as strongly as ever.

Haskins sent for a geologist of wide experience. The geologist looked the terrain over, conducted some experiments and made his report.

"It is very simple, Mr. Haskins," he told the Great Western's general manager. "Something that often happens in oil fields. The Bar C wells, situated at a lower level, are drawing off the oil from the pool your wells tapped. Doubtless the deposits are identical, covering a wide area. This is a condition that frequently exists when wells are drilled close together—one well gets the oil, the other is a dry hole."

There were rage and excitement when Haskins detailed the geologist's report to his co-conspirators.

"Why that's just the same as stealing our oil," declared Flint unctuously.

Brunner swore viciously. "Are we going to let Carney get away with it?" he demanded. "That's the fellow who caused all our trouble in the first place. He and that Ranger!"

Haskins' voice was coldly vindictive as he held up his soft, white hand for silence.

"No, we are not," he stated deliberately. "Gentlemen, that oil is ours and we are going to get it!"

"But how?" demanded Brunner. "You say the oil belongs to the man who pumps it out and it is impossible for us to claim it, even though we

know it is being pumped from under our land."

"Yes," replied Haskins, "the oil belongs to those who pump it out. Possession is everything there. Well, we are going to pump it out."

"But how?" repeated Brunner. Haskins leaned closer and spoke softly.

"If Carney's wells were not pumping, ours would produce," he said. "If Carney's wells were wrecked, it would take time, much time, to procure new machinery and drill new wells. During that time we would be pumping oil. Do you understand?"

They understood. With heads close together, the business wolves made their plans, ruthless plans that disregarded property rights and human life.

Oil was king in the Alamita Basin, but it was not the only source of revenue. The cattle business was booming as never before. The swarm of oil seekers in the valley required meat, much meat. No longer need the cattlemen ship to distant markets. The great slaughter houses in Alamita and the other boom towns swallowed the herds and asked for more.

John Damrock, upon whose land no producing wells had been sunk, was nevertheless making money hand over fist. The same applied to other outfits, including those of Reb Russell and Cale Robinson, who had long since abandoned their plans to move their herds to New Mexico. The small ranchers upon whose land no oil had been discovered were also prosperous.

BUT the trouble between the big and little owners had in no way lessened. An epidemic of rustling had broken out. With beef bringing top prices, widelooping was immensely profitable. It was going on at a rate and with a canniness that led Jim Rance to decide that a compact and highly organized band was responsible for most of it. The big spread owners blamed the small ranchers, however, and vice versa.

Jim Rance evolved a plan, a daring plan, which he believed would smash the rustling gang and prove to the warring factions that both were mistaken. He went to Reb Russell with it and after much argument persuaded the shrewd old cattleman to his way of thinking.

"All right," said Reb, "I'll trail along with you, but if I lose that big shipping herd, it'll be mighty serious."

"You won't," Jim assured him. "And if I'm figuring right, we'll break up this business once and for all."

"I'd intended sending 'em out in small batches," said Russell, "but I'll take a chance and send the whole herd at once."

To reach Alamita, Russell's herds were forced to pass through a long, winding gorge that opened out but a short distance from the shallow Rio Grande. On the other side of the river was Mexico, the paradise of rustlers.

It would take the big trail herd nearly a full day to reach the western mouth of the gorge. Then, after passing through it and turning sharply northeast, another day to make Alamita.

Russell spoke of his big shipment in Alamita several days before the day set for the drive. His riders also discussed it in saloons and dance halls. By the time the drive was started it was pretty generally known when and by what route it would travel.

The sun was still well up in the sky when the drive reached the western mouth of the gorge. The foreman called a halt and gave orders to make camp. The chuckwagon rumbled up and the cook began supper. Jim Rance, who rode with Russell's punchers, bestrode a chunky roan instead of his big golden sorrel. His hat was pulled low, his neckerchief muffled well up to his chin. He scanned the dark mouth of the gorge with interest.

"Those crows fooling around the tree tops in there seem mighty uneasy," he pointed out to the foreman. The foreman nodded, and gave his men careful and somewhat unusual orders.

The cowboys, quite a number of them for even so large a herd, ate their supper, smoked a while and then rolled up in their blankets about the fire. Two night hawks rode out to the herd. The night was dark and quiet and the tired cattle needed little attention.

Midnight came and the camp was silent. The fire had burned down to a dim glow which but faintly outlined the blanketed shapes. The chuckwagon loomed grotesquely against the sky. No sound came from either cattle or night hawks. Nothing to alarm the shadowy shapes that crept closer and closer to the camp.

Suddenly red flame spurted from the darkness. The roar of rifles and six-guns ripped the night apart with claws of ungodly noise. Yells of triumph soared up. Bullets smacked and thudded into the blanketed shapes about the dying fire. Shadows rushed out of the darkness, guns ready. They grouped together for a terrible moment of discovery, outlined by the faint glow of the fire.

From the hillside above the camp burst a withering blast of gunfire. A storm of lead swept the astounded group by the fire. Men went down like bowled-over rabbits. Others attempted to flee and were shot to death as they ran. From among the rocks swooped Reb Russell's cowboys, Jim Rance in their lead. The surprise had been complete. The rustlers, thinking to massacre a sleeping camp, had themselves been cut down to a man.

Jim Rance's keen eyes glimpsed a form scuttling on hands and knees into the brush. He went after it in a streaking dive, knocked a gun up just as it blazed, and smashed the skulker on the jaw. A moment later he dragged a limp form into the circle of firelight.

"Here's one what's got a punctured leg," he announced. "Well, if this isn't luck!"

The built up fire showed the ugly, blood-smeared face of Ad Phelps.

"The kingpin himself!" exclaimed Rance. "Boys, wait a minute; I got an idea."

For several minutes he stood looking down at the unconscious rustler, the idea elaborating into a plan. Finally he turned to the foreman.

"If this jigger knows, and I got a tall hunch he does, here's where I find out the thing I want to know most of all. Listen, now, and get things set before he comes to."

WHEN Phelps recovered his senses he found himself lying inside a circle of grim-faced cowboys who stared at him with cold, steady eyes. He read the promise of those bleak faces and cringed.

The foreman spoke. "Got that rope ready? We're going to stretch it a little."

"She's all rigged," replied a puncher, "hangin' over a limb and a loop in the loose end. Guess we might as well string him up and get it over with."

Phelps, his face livid, his hand twitching, let out a yell of terror. "You can't do that!" he yammered. "It isn't right!"

"What else can you do with rustlers except hang 'em?" wondered the foreman.

Phelps gibbered and writhed. He caught sight of Jim Rance's tall form, recognized the Texas Ranger.

"You won't let 'em do this!" he bawled. "You're a law officer. You can't let these fellers hang me!"

"Why not?" Jim asked him coldly. "You aren't any good to anybody."

"I am!" wailed Phelps, clutching at the Ranger's knees. "I'm plenty of good to you! I know things!"

"Nothing I don't know already," countered the Ranger. "I know you tried to drygulch me twice, once on the Bar C range and again that night

through the Black Ace window."

"I know other things," insisted Phelps. "I know what's going to happen to Carney's wells."

Jim stood directly in front of the groveling rustler and looked down at him; here was something he had not anticipated. His main object was for the moment forgotten.

"Talk," he said softly. "I'm not promising anything, yet, but talk. What's going to happen to Carney's wells?"

Phelps chattered words between his clicking teeth. "They're going to blow 'em up so's the oil will flow back in the Great Western wells."

"Who?" Jim demanded.

"Haskins and Brunner and Flint and Bart Dole," replied Phelps. "They're planning on doing it tomorrow night. I know they had dynamite set by the wells yesterday. They bribed drillers to do it."

For a long moment Jim stood staring down at the rustler. Phelps shivered and shook, casting quick, furtive glances at the Texas Ranger's bleak face, trying to read his purpose. His nerve was breaking.

"Don't look at me like that!" he screamed. "Don't you do it!"

Like the crack of a gun shot, Jim barked a question at him: "Phelps, who is Benson Cartwright?"

The rustler's big form seemed to shrivel and sink in. His eyes glared with terror.

"I—I can't tell you!" he whispered.

Jim's voice ground at him. "Who is he, I say?"

"He's—he's a devil!" Phelps yammered. "He knows things about me—about me and Bart Dole."

Jim turned to the foreman, spoke two words. "Take him!"

Two cowboys seized the rustler. Another dropped a noose over his head. Phelps screamed.

"I'll tell!" he howled as the noose tightened. "I'll—arrk!"

Jim made a sign; the cowboy eased off on the rope. Phelps gasped, coughed. His eyes were filmed with terror. "Talk!"

Phelps mouthed out words. "Benson Cartwright is—is the Great Western's general manager—Charles Haskins!"

Jim Rance stared at the rustler, who had collapsed in a mumbling heap. "I should have guessed it," he told himself. "That jigger had all the earmarks of being a topnotcher. Haskins!"

He turned to the foreman. "Tie him up and hold him," he ordered. "We'll let the law take its course with this coyote.

"It'll be daylight in about three hours," he continued. "Then I'll ride over to the Bar C. I reckon here's where we have a showdown and clean up this range and make it a decent place for folks to live. Hold the herd here today and bring it in tomorrow. I don't want anybody to learn what happened here just yet. I'm going to sleep a while now."

CHAPTER XVIII

Lead and Flame

GOLDEN dawn was casting its mantle over the lonely mountains when Jim set out for the Bar C. As he rode swiftly, the sun stabbed forth, the sky turned blue, and floods of level light poured over the prairie.

Jim had ample time to make the Bar C range by midnight, even though the horse he rode was not to be compared with Nugget. He was not yet certain what would be his course of action when he arrived.

Dark had long since come and passed when at last, from the crest of a long rise, he saw the twinkle of lights that marked the derricks in the Bar C valley. Higher yet glowed the lights of the Great Western wells. Toward that upper line of lights Jim rode. It was a tedious scramble down the dark, rock-strewn slope and his horse was tired. He dismounted and crept cautiously

toward the office building, where a light glowed.

In the main room of the office building, four men sat grouped about a table and talked in low tones. They were Cartwright, Flint, Brunner and Bart Dole. The sheriff appeared ill at ease. His hands twitched, his face was a dirty white beneath the tan. From time to time he glanced nervously over his shoulder. Cartwright regarded him with contempt.

"It's not due to happen yet, Dole," he remarked with a sneering laugh. "Not until you light the fuses."

Sweat popped out on the sheriff's face. He half rose from his chair. "Cartwright, I—I c-can't do it!" he stammered. "I've done plenty of bad things in my life, but this is different. This is cold-blooded murder!"

"It's no time to get squeamish," Cartwright replied coldly. "Of course if you would rather I tell what I know—they would be glad to see you at Stillwater, Dole."

"No, no," panted the sheriff.

"Then you light those fuses," said Cartwright with icy finality. "Our young friend won't suffer—not near so much as that poor girl who used to be your sweetheart did, when Phelps missed that Texas Ranger and ripped her in two with a slug. That was your plan, remember, Dole."

Bart Dole writhed in his chair again, his eyes haunted. "Nobody figured she'd get shot," he mumbled. "Nobody told her to use that knife."

"No," agreed Cartwright, "that was her idea. She thought to please you, to win you back from Damrock's girl. Well, with Carney out of the way, perhaps your suit will be more successful. She'll never know it was your hand that blew Carney to pieces, Dole."

Again the wretched sheriff half rose from his chair, only to sink back again under the steady stare of Benson Cartwright's cold eyes.

Brunner and Flint, hard as they were, grew uncomfortable. "Oh, let the poor fool be," growled Brunner.

"Are you sure everything is lined up properly? You sure there is no chance of Carney getting loose and giving the alarm? That would be a fine kettle of fish!"

"No danger of that happening," replied Cartwright. "Our friend Carney is carefully bound and gagged and locked in the tool house at the base of Number One derrick. When Dole touches off the first fuse, Carney will be on his way. The other derricks are mined also and the fuses laid. Dole knows where they are and will light them in their turn."

"What if those two drillers who laid the dynamite and kidnaped Carney get drunk or something and talk?" asked Flint.

"No danger of that, either, my dear Flint," replied Cartwright. "Tomorrow their bodies will be found beside the trail to Alamita. I am a pretty good shot, Flint."

Flint stared at the cruel face and shuddered slightly. Bart Dole writhed in his chair. "You never forget anything, do you?" commented Brunner. "You never slip up!"

FROM the half open doorway across the room a voice sounded.

"Oh, yes, he does! He slipped when he hired Ad Phelps to do his dirty work, and his next slip is going to be in the loose end of a rope!"

Gasping startled oaths, the men at the table whirled to face the door. A tall figure stood there, a tense, terrible figure of vengeance. "The Texas Ranger!" screamed Flint.

Jim Rance's big guns were in his hands. His eyes, glittering like dagger points, were steady behind the sights. "Hands up, gents," he said softly. "Trail's end!"

Slowly the four pairs of hands went up, Benson Cartwright's slowest of all. The arch conspirator's face was white and drawn, his eyes burning with baffled fury. Like a darting snake his slim hand lunged forward, the stubby Derringer shot from his sleeve and spatted against his clutching palm.

He heard Flint's yell of agony, Brunner's deep-toned curse. The Derringer spouted flame and smoke. A heavy bullet ripped his shoulder. Cartwright went hurtling behind the overturned table.

Dole's gun was coming out. Brunner was blazing away with a heavy Smith and Wesson. The room was roaring and thundering with the explosions of six-shooters.

Jim shot Brunner between the eyes. He laced two bullets through Bart Dole's heart as the sheriff pressed trigger. Then the Derringer behind the table boomed again and the big hanging lamp went out in a jangle of smashed metal. Flaming drops of oil spattered here and there.

In a moment of darkness before the flames leaped up fiercely, Jim heard a rending crash of breaking glass and splintering wood. Cartwright had dived through a nearby window.

Jim raced through toward the outer air. Behind him the flames of the burning office, fanned by a strong wind pouring through the broken window, roared loudly. He reached the outside and by the light of the fire saw Cartwright running swiftly along the edge of the cliff. He paused for a breathless instant, there was a flicker of flame and a sputtering flower of fire went writhing down the face of the cliff. Cartwright had fired the fuse to Number One derrick. Even as Jim's Colt roared he dived into the growth and vanished.

Jim did not pursue him, although he raced in the same direction. His one thought was to reach the tool house at the foot of Number One derrick. Panting, gasping, stumbling over unseen rocks, falling and rising again, he rushed down the winding track that led to the valley floor, running a terrible race with that fluttering flower of fire that was death's messenger. He reached the lower level just as the shower of sparks leaped down the foot of the cliff and vanished. Here, of course, the fuse was concealed. He could not hope to find it.

STRAIGHT for the door of the tool house he plunged. It was securely locked with a heavy padlock. The planks that formed the door were thick and strong.

With all his steely strength, Jim Rance wrenched and tore at the lock. It resisted his efforts. He found a heavy stone and hammered it. To no avail. The remorseless seconds were ticking away.

A shot roared out of the dark. Jim heard the sharp spat of a bullet against the wood scant inches from his head. Cartwright had also reached the valley floor. High up on the cliff the blazing office building flamed to the sky. A tall derrick had caught fire, and the wooden walls of a huge reservoir.

Jim leaped back from the door and drew his Colt. He set the muzzle as close as he dared to the padlock and pulled the trigger. The big gun boomed. It leaped and bucked in his hand. Again he fired, and again. Then he ripped the shattered, twisted metal of the lock away and flung open the door. The unseen Cartwright seared his cheek with a bullet as he did so.

For an agonized moment Jim groped inside the dark tool house. His searching fingers touched a human face. Stooping, he lifted the bound and gagged form of Tom Carney to his shoulder and staggered through the door. He ran stumblingly, blindly, anywhere to get away from the frightful explosion.

Like the rending apart of creation, the dynamite let go. The tall derrick jumped into the air. Its lower portion flew to hurtling fragments and the whole huge structure came crashing down through a welter of yellow flame.

Jim and his helpless burden were hurled to the ground. For a moment he lay stunned, dimly sensing that fragments of wood and stone were raining all about him. He sat up as

the turmoil ceased, ripping at the cords that held Carney prisoner.

LIKE a waiting echo to the first, a second explosion, vastly greater, set the very hills to rocking. On top of the cliff, where the office building and derrick still blazed, the gates of Hell themselves seemed to open. From the shattered reservoir rushed a rolling torrent of flame. It was the oil, burning as it came, pouring in a fiery flood toward the edge of the cliff. It reached the lip and plunged downward in a welter of flame. By the ghastly light Jim saw a figure fleeing before the horrible death that lapped at his heels.

It was Benson Cartwright. Terror lent wings to his feet, but the flood of fire rushed down the steep slope like a raging wind. Jim, freeing the last of Carney's bonds, heard Cartwright's shriek of agony and despair as the flood caught up with him. For an awful instant he stood, mouth wide open, face twisted and distorted, the waves of fire curling about his waist. Then he vanished and the burning flood roared on.

* * * * *

"Yes, that finished it," Jim Rance told old Sam Sullivan late the following evening as the two discussed a bottle in the back room of the Black Ace. "Carney lost a derrick, but that was about all. Incidentally he got a wife. Old John Damrock gave them his blessing and Tom and Rose were looking for a *padre* the last I saw of 'em. Folks in the Basin have got the real truth about things now and the cattle war is ended. There won't be any more wire-cutting. Flint managed to crawl out of that burning building and he talked before he died. He tied up the loose ends."

"What started the whole thing?"

"Seems Cartwright stumbled on that oil seepage in the cave years ago, according to Flint," Jim replied. "He was on the run from the law right then and couldn't do anything about it. The law caught up with him and he went to Stillwater prison for ten years. When he got out and got his hands on some money again, he learned that this Basin had been settled.

"Along with Brunner and Flint, who put up most of the money, he figured out his scheme to clean folks out of the valley. He'd met Dole in prison and after Dole escaped he got track of him again and found out he was here in the Basin and, so far as anyone knew, he was going straight. Cartwright figured once a crook, always a crook, and sent Flint over here to make a deal.

"Flint succeeded and Dole took over this end of the scheme. He brought Ad Phelps back from Mexico and Ad imported some of his old gang along later. They pulled Garcia into it, too.

"Garcia was an old sidekick of Dole's. He and Garcia would have double-crossed the rest of 'em if it hadn't been for Cartwright knowing Dole was an escaped prisoner. Guess that's about all there was to it. Easy enough, once I got all the threads in my fingers."

"Uh-huh," agreed Sullivan, "easy enough! And it's easy to see why one Texas Ranger is worth a regiment of soldiers!"

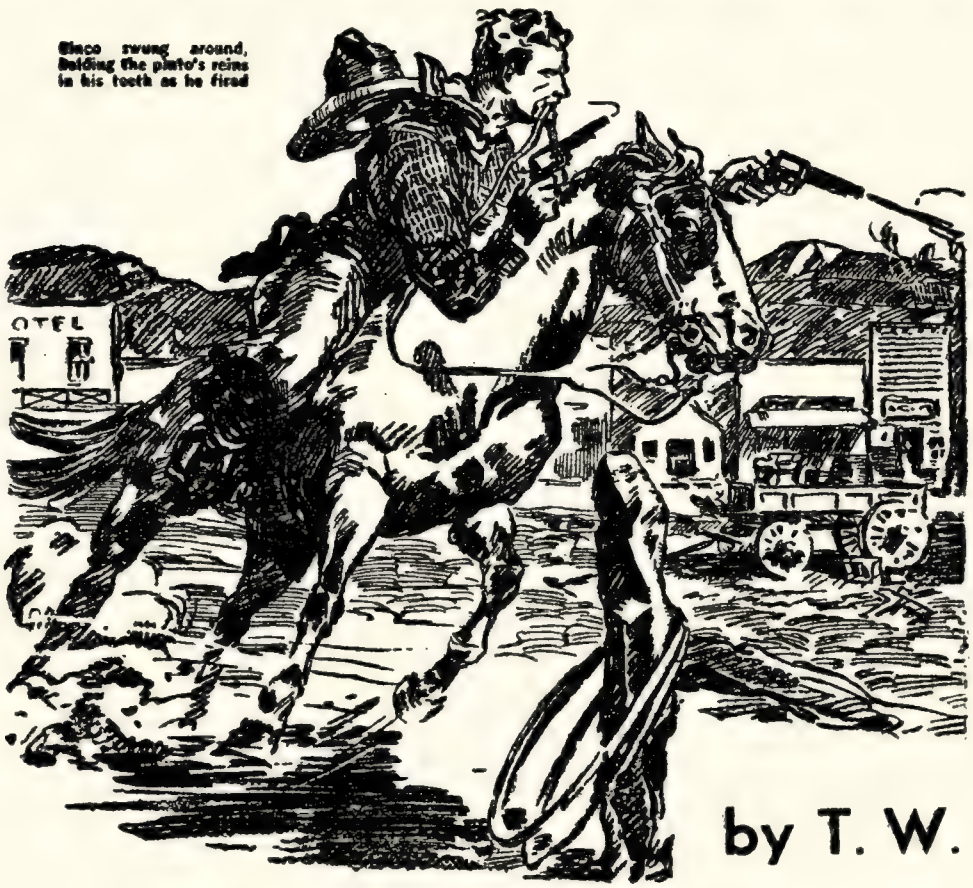
A few days later, the grizzled old Ranger captain at headquarters stared at the report sent in by Ranger Jim Rance.

Matter in question taken care of. Had a little shooting with parties causing the trouble. They lost the argument.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" remarked the captain, reaching for a sheet of paper. He wrote a brief letter.

As a result of that letter, the ace Texas Ranger, tall, lithe, level of eye and lean of jaw, a few days later rode out of Alamita Basin. His eyes were sunny. A smile quirked the corners of his w i d e, good-humored mouth. That letter from his captain had assigned him another dangerous task. Jim Rance was happy!

TIED TRIGGERS



Cisco swung around, holding the pinto's reins in his teeth as he fired

by T. W.

CHAPTER I

Escape

HE EASED down the road, a slouching, loose-built, shiftless-looking hombre, thumbs hooked lazily in the low-draped gunbelt. It seemed as if he was going no place, and cared less.

The pot-bellied horse-trader halted on the sagging steps of the hay-and-feed store.

"Hey, ain't seen you for years!" he cried. "Why, you ring-tailed coot."

The loose-limbed, long hombre's right-hand fingers folded over the ivory butt protruding from the tied-down holster. "No-o?"

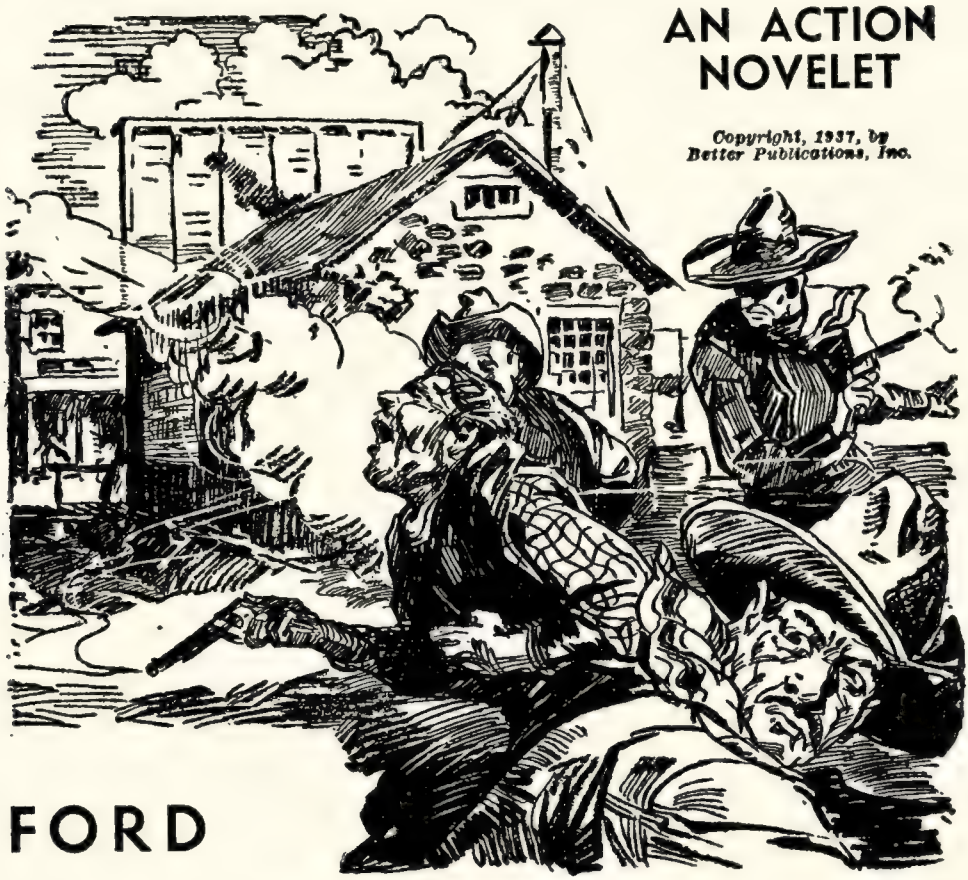
"Naw!" The horse-trader grinned, fat face a sea of seams. "Say, remember that night we almost shot the roof off Tyler's place over Los Pintos way?"

The long hombre shook his head. The thong binding the holster tip to his thigh went taut. "No-o, I don't remember."

The horse-trader mopped his face, that was suddenly beaded with cold sweat. He felt uncomfortable. The cold fires licking under the long gent's droopy eyelids made him nervous.

"Say—uh—aren't you—"

Cinco Cowley wants only one thing, revenge against the law —but what happens behind the gunsmoke pall packs surprises!



AN ACTION NOVELET

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FORD

"Cinco" Cowley didn't move, but his long body went rigid as steel. If this jasper knew him, Cinco figured he'd have to kill him, shoot him down where he stood. He was ready to do so.

"Well"—the horse-trader swallowed—"aren't you Racy Reilly of Cutters Junction?"

All Cinco Cowley remembered of a smile flickered on his flat-sided face. "No—not him."

The horse-trader peered, realized his mistake, mumbled, "G'day," and waddled hurriedly to the nearest bar to burn out that cold, dead feeling in his stomach.

Cinco Cowley whistled softly, moved on, the ragweed of the gutter brushing his boots. In front of the barbershop, he pushed his face close to the fly-grimed window. He whistled again as he stepped back.

For Cinco Cowley had come home. And nobody had known him—which was just what he wanted.

He'd passed old Doc Haydee, who'd bucked a blizzard years back to bring him into the world. Even asked him for a match. Old Doc, almost stone deaf, had stared at him, then doddered on. And "Pa" Perts, who ran the general store, had called him "stranger" when he went in to buy a sack of tobacco.

He'd been outside, backed against

a hitch-rail, when Big Frank, the deputy, swaggered by, sleeve-shining his star like he always did. And he had recognized Cinco no more than had those others. No more than had Pedro, the barber.

When a hombre's been gone over ten years, folks do forget him. The walls of the Big House do things to a man's face, anyway.

That mask-like face of Cinco's suddenly jerked, mouth ripping wide. Down the hill, from a fork off the main trail, a horse and buggy came at a spanking gait. The plume of dust behind stretched up the slope to a sprawling, weather-beaten mansion. And the gent at the reins had a short, white beard and a white mane of hair that blew in the wind under his flat, black hat.

Cinco Cowley went rigid, gun half out. That was Mills Seward, the judge who'd condemned him to prison.

THE buggy rattled down the dreary street, with its sunbaked false fronts, swung in almost beside Cinco. The judge fumbled for the step with his foot, squinting out of his shortsighted eyes. Years back, he'd come into that lawless land with ideas of law and order backed by a six-gun. Now he was county judge, dispensing justice with a stern, unflinching hand. It was justice as he saw it, anyway.

Cinco Cowley had laid his plans on that unswerving justice.

The judge stepped to the ground, looked squarely at Cinco a full moment, then turned his back and headed for his daily shave at Pedro's. Cinco's leather-hued hand contorted over his gun-butt. Then he tamped the .45 firmly down in the sheath. That wasn't the way. He had planned something that would hurt the judge far worse than death.

The ghost of a smile flickering on his still-young face despite the mark of prison walls, he crossed the road. His cheap horsehide boots scooped up dust as he headed to where he'd tethered his pinto in the sparse shade of a tamarisk tree. Everything was set. Even the man who'd condemned him had failed to recognize him.

Cinco couldn't restrain a shudder as he stepped onto the latticed shadow thrown by the bars on a window of the town jail. A moment later, the jail door jerked open on the momentarily deserted street. In the vague shadow of the interior, the barrel body on pipestem legs of Cassor, the peace officer, new since Cinco's time, showed. And as his face with the beardlike pig bristles pushed furtively out, instinct made the Cinco gunny glide behind his pony, wait with drawn gun barrel flattened against his leg.

A man was suddenly shoved out of the jail. A glistening gun arched under the sun, sank a crease in the man's sombrero. As he staggered, a boot sent him stumbling down the steps. Slowly he straightened, peered, then groped through the heat devils dancing up from the alkali. A single pony, a spavined crowbait, stood before the jail. He was almost to it, remembered those at his back, wheeled slowly as he dug a Colt from a hip holster.

As three bared gun muzzles protruded from the jail doorway, he threw up his own gun. He pushed his sombrero back, revealing thin, reddish hair straggled with sweat, shook his head to clear it.

"Don't shoot—" he started to say.

A gun ripped. Its slug slashed the alkali beside the red-headed hombre's boot. Cinco distinctly saw him trigger. Nothing happened but for the little, hollow click of the hammer on an empty shell. Then the man understood that he was doomed. They'd given him an empty gun.

He whipped around, flung himself desperately at the crowbait. And Cinco Cowley was drawing chips with him in that instant. A jerk of his thumb eared back the gun hammer to full cock. His other hand

snaked to the shoulder hideout under his calfskin vest. If he got himself marked in that town, it might break up his cold, bitter scheme. But he hated the Law, hated what those behind it were about to do.

The red-headed hombre got half into the crowbait's kak. A yell burst from the jail.

"He's escaping! He's escaping! Careful! He's armed and—"

The three gun muzzles in the doorway jerked up horizontal. And Cinco bolted ahead of his pony, jumped behind the trunk of the tamarisk. Heads bobbed out along the road. A gun smashed lead from the doorway again. And there was a simultaneous report blended with it. Cinco's. His slug toothed out a fragment of the doorway.

There was a howl of surprise from there, the scrape of hastily backing boots, an oath. The door was shoved half closed. Out in the road, the red-haired hombre was dragging himself into the saddle with one arm. He'd taken that second slug from the jail in his other arm.

More gunfire broke from there. One of the men inside had shifted to a window, was slinging lead between the bars. The guns of the other two barked from well behind the aperture of the door. Their lead horneted out as the crowbait suddenly reared. It saved the wounded redhead for the moment. He made a bad target.

And Cinco Cowley went cold, deadly mad. He'd seen the trick before. Below the Border, it was known as the *Ley del Fuego,* the Law of Fire. They'd let a prisoner loose, let him think he had a chance to get away, then shoot him down in cold blood. "Shot while trying to escape" was the official explanation.

CINCO darted out from behind the tree to get both Colts in action. They spat. Again. And again.

Lead flailed into the front of the 'dobe building, rattled off the iron bars, gashed into the heavy door. It drove those inside back. There was a split-second lull. Men had come out of saloons, were hustling from the store, darting into the road.

Cinco swung, sent two bullets screaming high down the street. It emptied as men dived for doors and alleys, stumbling over each other, clawing and jostling, to get to safety.

Cinco slipped back behind the tree, snapped fresh shells into one emptied gun. A sudden hot sting in his right shoulder sent him backward. On top of it came the snarl of a gun. One hombre in the jail had swung to a side window, had a slant on him, had seared his flesh.

The next instant, Cinco had his left gun spitting. Behind the bars of the side window a man leaped back, clutching his arm. His released gun tumbled through the bars.

Cinco ran into the road, yelled to the redhead, tossed him the gun he'd just reloaded. Then the tall cowboy swung into the kak of his own pinto, quickly thumbed a couple of shells into the still-smoking second gun.

Cassor, the peace marshal, tried to edge his weapon around the door for another shot. The redhead slapped a few chunks of lead around the marshal's wrist. The latter was jerked back.

"Reckon we better be busting the breeze, pardner," called Cinco.

The redhead nodded. Jabbing spurs, they swung headlong down the road. Shots and yells followed them from the jail. The whole town knew the prisoner had escaped. Men began to snipe at the riders as they came on, Cinco holding the pinto in to trail the heaving crowbait.

Once Cinco swung around, holding the pinto's reins in his teeth as he fired with both his guns at a group of men. One man went down, clutching at his chest. The others turned and fled from that withering blast of gunfire. Cinco wheeled his mount and rode on along the street.

Judge Mills Seward popped out of the barbershop, face half-lathered,

digging for a gun under his coattails. Again Cinco Cowley could have killed him. He didn't, but sent a shell smashing into the barber's sign beside the judge's ear. The judge ducked back inside.

Cinco and the escaping prisoner hit the edge of the town. Cinco reined in, sidled the pony around, saw one man, already mounted, sloping after them. The tall hombre with the face that had forgotten how to smile steadied his gun across his forearm, triggered twice. The onrushing pony went down, screaming, struck in the foreleg, pitching its rider.

Men who'd rushed out into the street faded back from the hitch-rails. Cinco Cowley calmly swung his pinto alongside a couple of cow-ponies tethered in front of the boot-makers, at the edge of town, cut them loose with his Bowie knife. With a bat of his sombrero he sent one horse stampeding out of the town, snaked the other along with him to swap for the bogged-down crowbait the redhead forked.

It made him a horse-thief. Cinco didn't care. They could hang him when they caught him. Once he'd seen the judge mete out his grim justice to a prisoner. That prisoner was—

The wind raised by his wildly galloping mount tore the harsh laugh from Cinco Cowley's lips.

CHAPTER II

Deserted Ranch

WORRYING about Cinco, "Montana Johnny" whittled faster and faster. According to the sun, the waddy should have been back an hour ago. Montana Johnny was always worrying about Cinco. Cinco was so danged locoed.

His honed-down Bowie worked furiously. His big, round eyes kept straining through the foliage and down the trail. He was hidden on a little knoll that humped out from the wall of a small pass. The main stage road went through the pass. But a few hundred yards before the pass, a hard-beaten cowtrack, scarcely perceptible, wound off through a mesquite jungle and up a hogback ridge. Montana Johnny wished that Cinco was riding up that cowpath now, the lunk-headed fool!

It wasn't that Montana didn't like Cinco. He thought he was wonderful. Cinco was everything that he wasn't. Cinco was calm and hard and not afraid of anything. Not like himself. He got weak and shaky and had to fight an itch to eat crow whenever a fight came. Cinco was big and strong, Montana knew. You get to know an hombre inside penitentiary walls.

And Montana Johnny knew Cinco's plan of vengeance. Didn't blame him for wanting it, either. But he didn't want him to carry it out, because he knew somebody would remember Cinco or give him away. Then Cinco would go back to the Big House, if he wasn't hanged.

Montana swore in his thin voice. Cinco was too-good an hombre to stretch rope or rot behind bars. He'd served his time and squared himself with the Law. Now he ought to get himself a little spread, maybe get hitched to a nice girl. He wasn't like Montana Johnny. No woman would look at him, Montana Johnny, twice with that withered leg. He stared at it now and began to call it names.

Hoofbeats rumbled over his voice. They were coming down the valley, hard and fast, more than one pony. Riding like gents with a posse on their coattails.

Montana Johnny reached for the Winchester against a tree. He wasn't afraid with a rifle. It was when he got face to face with a gent slinging a short-gun that his nerve ran out on him like leaking water.

Two riders shot around the bend

in the little valley, were gone behind a clump of brush. When they reappeared, Montana Johnny saw that one was Cinco, swaying easily in the kak with the motion of his pony. The other, a red-headed jasper, swayed too. But it was from weakness.

Cinco swerved over, reached out and steadied the redhead.

"Just like Cinco—always helpin' the weak ones," muttered Montana, remembering the time Cinco had stopped a guard from kicking him and had been given twenty lashes for it.

The two riders swung around a broad chimney butte, dropped into the dry wash that crossed the valley floor. Cinco turned both ponies toward the cowpath that dived into the mesquite. At the edge of it, he rose straight in the stirrups, holding his warped Stetson aloft a moment.

That was the signal. It meant to Montana Johnny that Cinco had run into trouble down there in the town, that men were on his trail. The heads of the two bobbed above the mesquite, vanished as the branches rose.

Montana Johnny spat out his cigarette as a bunch of riders strung around the bend where Cinco had appeared, larruping hard. Montana's thin jaw locked. He'd decided something. These gents weren't going to catch Cinco. Nobody ever was. Never! Because he wasn't going to let Cinco go through with that plan of his. Not if it cost Montana Johnny his own life!

Montana waited until the pursuing men were halfway to the butte. Then his Winchester bucked against his shoulder and one of the horsemen in the van ducked as lead whined past his head. Montana triggered again. A clump of sage beside another rider jerked as lead ripped through it. The riders reined in and wheeled.

Lead from the posse slashed toward the pass. Slowly Montana Johnny pumped the Winchester. Men had dismounted. They spread, seeking shelter, working the rifles taken from saddle-boots. The slugs began to cut and hornet closer to the knoll. Montana Johnny laughed a little. He was in no danger. And he could cut one of them down if he felt like it.

He didn't, though. He slipped more shells into the magazine. Just so long as they thought Cinco had holed up in the pass, was enough.

A LITTLE while later, Montana slammed more lead at the men down in the valley. He knew they were working to get around the flank and behind him at the other side of the pass. He emptied that load, cradled the gun in one arm, backtracked to an elbow of rock.

Behind it, a line of rawhide was dangling from a sapling thirty feet up at the top of the pass. Montana Johnny snaked up the rawhide, loped through the trees to his pinto picketed in a little hollow. He mounted and rode east at right angles to the pass. It would be an hour or so before those men were sure the pass was empty. Then they'd figure Cinco had slipped out the other end of it.

Montana Johnny rode at a lope up the hogback, came to a lightning-blasted cedar, whistled three times. Cinco rode out of a thicket, with the other man behind him, lips curled back in a mirthless grin.

"You worked it?"

Montana nodded. He couldn't help but grin back, even though he knew he was going to have trouble with Cinco.

"Sure, boss. They're squatting down there like a pack of dumb coyotes 'round an empty hen coop!"

He looked meaningly at the redhead, who seemed sleepy. Cinco told him about what had happened, as he rolled a smoke with incredible quickness.

"Name of Red Hatcher," he ended.

"You mighta got killed," Mon-

tana Johnny burst out.

Cinco shrugged. "He'll have to wait till tomorrow to get me. After that, I don't give a hoot. Come on."

They rode on, "Red" Hatcher in front, Cinco, then Montana Johnny. Montana always liked to ride behind Cinco. Then he could be sure nobody'd get him in the back.

With the sun in mid-sky, they rounded the charred crater of a burned barn, worked through the lily-white blossoms of a clump of yucca, moved down into a hollow. An ancient, tottering ruin of a *rancho* crouched in the center of it in a tangle of weeds, scrub growth and cacti. A wind-blown dune almost obliterated one corner of it. Glassless windows gaped from crumbling walls like eyeless sockets.

It was all that was left of the old Twin Stirrup outfit since the Shagon River, changing its course after flood stage, had converted that piece of range into a parched waste.

Cinco reined up between a segment of the old corral fence and the ranchhouse ruins, and rolled another smoke. Red Hatcher blinked his sleepy eyes and started to speak. Cinco held up a hand. After a moment, "Swivel" Hustor called down from his lookout post on the roof.

"Trail's clear, Cinco!"

Cinco dropped to the ground, led his pony around to the rear of the place. A gap in the wall showed faintly through the rank brush. They walked their ponies up a pile of debris and into one of the rooms of the deserted *rancho*.

Knowing what he was going to do, Montana Johnny kept looking furtively at Cinco, at the strength stamped in his long jaw, and tried to steady his own lower lip.

Two of the bunch of whom Cinco and Montana Johnny were a part appeared in the hallway, said "Howdy." Cinco led the way into the cook shack at the back of the place. Some unwashed tin plates stood on the table. Saddle rolls were lying around the room.

Swivel Huston came down from the roof. Then Cinco answered the unspoken question that was in the eyes of all the men.

"The layout's slick. In three-four days we stack the deck!"

They nodded. Cinco smiled thinly as he eyed them. Good hombres. There was Swivel, long-drawn and weary-looking, who got his name because his holsters were slung on swivels in his gun-belt. He just tilted the noses up and fired through the open holster tips. His crossed-eyes made it tougher, because he seemed to be looking at somebody else when he sent lead into a man.

And prim, little "Two-Deck" Dodds, who at the moment was scraping a grease spot off his flowered vest with a hasp knife. He had the soft brown eyes of a gentle horse. A card dealer, he had a habit of running two decks into a game. Always said a man never died poor if he could borrow a card from the extra deck at the right moment.

SHUFFLING, woeful-faced "Pinto" Stair was the third member of the group. Folks said he'd been a circuit-riding preacher once. Pinto never said anything about that, nor about anything else, much. He'd done a heap of riding in his time, sudden and pronto—because Pinto had a weakness for ponies, especially pintos. And he never could afford to go through the conventional routine of buying them.

"All right," said Swivel. "All right. This gent drawin' chips, too?"

He nodded toward Red Hatcher. Cinco told them about how the lawmen had tried practically to drygulch the redhead.

"Meet the boys, Hatcher!" he introduced.

Hatcher had dropped down on a box, propped his head on a hand, as if he could hardly keep awake. He forced his face up and nodded dumbly to their hello's, plucked at the neckerchief Cinco had knotted

about his wounded arm. Two-Deck slid off the table.

"Both of you are wounded, huh?"

"Take care of him first," said Cinco.

The little gambler shoved some fresh wood into the sheet-iron stove and placed a bucket of water over it. "What?" he turned his head to say.

For Swivel had spoken again. He wanted to know what Hatcher had been in the *cuartel* for. Swivel was particular with whom he rubbed elbows. Two counties wanted him for killings. Swivel always said a man could get in plumb bad trouble moseying around with some two-bit lobo.

Cinco shook Red Hatcher as Two-Deck began to wash out the arm wound. Hatcher smiled drowsily.

"What was I locked up for? Oh, I —Let's see—Oh, yeah!" His face worked with the effort of remembering. "I was lickered up pretty bad and I got in a ruckus with some gent in the barroom. Seemed like I figgered he was going to pull a knife and went for my hogleg! Then a deputy grabbed me and—"

His eyes stayed open. But they seemed to have dulled with sleep even with the lids up. Two-Deck knotted the crude bandage on the arm and Cinco shook Hatcher again, then pushed a jug of whisky toward him. Hatcher mumbled his thanks and took a drink.

"But they was trying to kill you when they made like they was letting you escape," Cinco said. "Don't seem right they'd want to shoot a orey-eyed jasper what—"

Hatcher shook his head heavily. "That's right. It was something else. I can't remember just right. It's hard to—to think. Some of 'em come in. They didn't know I was in a cell in the back. They begun to talk."

The red-haired man, rubbing his eyes, hesitantly told the rest of it. Cassor, the peace marshal, had been one of the men talking. When they found Hatcher was there and hearing it all, Cassor had gone sort of loco. Then, in the morning, they'd dragged him out and shoved him through the door, tried to fill his hide with lead.

"I'm right thankful to you," he said to Cinco, "for what you done—"

Cinco Cowley nodded impatiently. "But what was they talking about that you heard, that made them so ornery?"

Red Hatcher rubbed his forehead and again shook his head slowly. "Can't seem to remember rightly. Cassor kept saying something about a judge—"

"The judge?" Cinco galvanized, half rose from his chair.

Hatcher nodded. "Uh-huh. Judge somebody. Can't seem to remember. Nothin's much clear in my head." He fumbled toward where he'd been slapped by Cassor's gun barrel. "Head feels—well, it don't feel. I know it was important, but I can't make it out in my mind now—"

His voice drifted off into silence. Cinco ground out his cigarette under his runover heel, leaned over Hatcher, whose head had slumped down on the table. He'd seen cases like that before when a man had been gun-whipped hard. Still, if it was about the judge, he had to know. He gripped Hatcher by the chin, turned up his face.

"Judge Seward, wasn't it?"

Hatcher closed his eyes with the effort of remembering. "Yes-s—that's it—I think. Seward."

"What did they say about him?"

Hatcher sighed. "Can't quite recollect. Seems like it was something about how he wouldn't be 'round them parts much longer. Something like that." His head slumped again.

Cinco drew in his breath hard and brought his open hand down on the rickety table. "Means he's retiring. Pulling stakes, maybe. Boys, we stack that deck tonight!"

Montana Johnny tongued his lips twice and dropped a hand to his short-gun in the tied-down holster

on his hip. He knew he'd have to back his words with gun talk.

CHAPTER III

Vengeance Plot

A SCARECROW of a figure shuffled into the doorway of the bunkroom tacked onto the cook shack. He stood swaying there a moment, peering dully at the faces of the men, unaware of the disgust mirrored on them. Then he half-stumbled to the whisky jug, hoisted it and took a long swallow.

Cinco Cowley had gone as rigid as steel. He took in the newcomer, his soiled jeans, the torn, faded Mexican bolero, the drooling lips and yellow-shot, coyotelike eyes. The weak jaw under the month-old stubble and the marijuana-stained teeth. The corn-colored hair hanging raggedly over the low forehead. A wreck of a man, a skulking weakling, and as dirty-hearted as he was dirty-hided.

He suddenly lifted his face, snuffling, upper lip curling in a sneer.

"I want to get me a card game," he whined the feigned defiance. "Gamble! I got to get some *dinero* pronto!"

"We'll get you a card game—tonight, Ben Seward," Cinco said softly. "I promise you—Ben Seward." For that mockery of a man was the son of Judge Mills Seward.

The judge's son lifted the jug again, and Cinco Cowley's thoughts flashed back across the years. Back to the time when he had his little two-bit spread and a lot of high hopes, despite the Silom brothers who were prodding for trouble on the other side of his fence. He'd come upon that cut fence, found the Siloms in a little draw on the other side of it, driving off a bunch of new unbranded dogies from those white-faced Herefords he'd mortgaged his outfit to get.

There'd been some gunpowder burned. He'd wounded one of the Siloms, recovered his stuff, started to drive it back. Then his pony had hit a hole, tossing him heavily, breaking an arm and knocking him out. When he'd come to, badly dazed, he'd dragged himself home somehow.

Big Frank, the deputy, was waiting for him there. Rustling charge. He'd found dogies with the Double S brand of the Silom's, half blotted out, on Cinco's range. The Siloms had made charges that they'd been fired upon when they'd tried to get them back.

Cinco knew they'd done that branding and crude blotting when he'd been injured. And he knew Judge Mills Seward for a square honest man, was sure that the judge knew him for what he was. His dad and the judge had fought through the wars with the sheepmen together. His dad had saved the judge's life once. So Cinco had stood trial, unafraid, confident of the outcome.

And Judge Mills Seward had charged the jury that Cinco was guilty and given him ten years in the Big House. Ten years in which Cinco had thought of but one thing: how he'd take back the life that his dad had given the judge.

Then, just before he was freed, word had come to Cinco that Ben Seward, the judge's son, had gone south of the Border to make his fortune.

Cinco, too, had crossed the Rio, ridden weary months until he'd found Ben Seward. Found a sodden wreck of a man, unrecognizable for what he'd once been, living like a *peon*, swigging *mescal* and smoking *marijuana* constantly. A man hiding out from a shooting charge in the Panhandle—a man whose only interest in life was the flick of the pasteboards and the click of coins as they were shoved out.

An idea had taken form in Cinco Cowley's hate-filled mind. An idea that would break Judge Mills Seward's heart far more than any steel-jacketed slug could. He'd brought Ben Seward back across the Line with him, back up here to his home range.

Cinco was going to pay off the judge in his own coin. He was going to let the judge give him his vengeance with his own hand that rapped the six-gun butt he used for a gavel, with his own crusty voice that droned out the jail sentence. Cinco was going to let Judge Mills Seward send his own son to the Big House!

Ben Seward put down the jug after taking another drink.

"Tonight, you said?"

"Tonight," repeated Cinco. "You'll get in a card game with the stakes so high you won't have to worry about grub for ten years—maybe more."

Ben Seward's craven eyes glowed dully, like a coyote scenting carrion. His loose lips hung open.

"If I win!" he said huskily.

"You'll win," promised Cinco.

THE judge's son stumbled back to the pole cot in the bunkhouse. Swivel spat, as if he wanted to get a bad taste out of his mouth. Two-Deck heated a knife and seared the bullet scratch on Cinco's shoulder, to guard it against infection. Pinto Stair dropped his two-holstered gunbelt on the table beside Swivel's and prepared to catch a nap.

Then Montana Johnny's little, shaking voice bit at them.

"Hold it, all of you! Don't make no move—for God's sake, don't!"

He stood at the side of the room, gun drawn, his hand a clenched white claw around the butt. He had Cinco covered from the side.

"What's the idea, you darned galoot? You been out takin' a chew of loco weed."

Then Cinco's half smile died, for Montana Johnny said: "Cinco, you ain't going to do it!"

Cinco Cowley rose slowly without moving his chair, long legs bridging it. All at once his face was an iron mask, hate-hungry and ruthless, with any human feeling behind it dead. He'd lived for this. Nobody was going to stop him. Not even a gun muzzle staring him in the eye.

"No?" he said.

Montana Johnny saw all those things. A sob tore his voice. "Don't, Cinco! I don't want to shoot you! Don't, Cinco. They'll catch you, they'll hang you maybe, they'll send you back to prison if you try to—"

Cinco laughed harshly. "Let 'em catch me! I want to be there anyway when the judge sends his own son up! I'll testify again him to make it stick, if I have to."

"It ain't worth it, Cinco!" pleaded Montana. "Go away from here. Settle down. Forget it. Some day—"

"Some day, hell!" bit off Cinco, straightening more. "You lily-livered, beardless button, you never sat ten years behind walls, knowing you shouldn't be there, knowing a man who owed his life to your Pop—"

"Don't!" squeaked Montana Johnny. His hand stopped shaking. He had the gun-hammer eared back. He was scared but steady as he saw Cinco's hand droop toward his holster. "I'll wing your gun arm, then you won't be able to do it at all! I will, Cinco! Don't!"

"I'd crawl outa hell with my eyeballs hanging out to do it!" Cinco gritted in a heavy whisper.

A gun blasted. Montana Johnny went pitching against the back wall of the shed. Ghastly horror froze on his face, twisted to a grimace of anguish as he realized he was still alive. He stood huddled, as if beaten in a storm. His fingers opened. His gun dropped. The fright-stiffened fingers clawed across to his wounded shoulder, the left.

Red Hatcher, half risen from the table, stood with his gun smoking in

front of him, cocking the hammer again. With a tigerish leap, Cinco threw himself on Hatcher and wrested the gun from his grip.

"You saved my life, so—" mumbled Hatcher.

Cinco nodded, threw the gun on the table.

"Y-you won't go, Cinco?" Montana Johnny begged.

Cinco walked to the back door and listened to the rustle of a sage hen in the brush as he built himself a quirly. Now, more than ever, he'd make the judge pay. The judge had cost him his best friend. He gave Montana his answer as he addressed Pinto and Swivel and Two-Deck.

"We'll be riding in a coupla hours, boys."

NIGHT was not far off when they reined up beside a boulder on the trail's edge outside the cowtown. Cinco had swapped his black hat for a moth-eaten gray one he'd found in the ranchhouse. He was confident he wouldn't be recognized as a party to the gun battle that morning.

Red Hatcher and Montana Johnny weren't with them. But Ben Seward, ragged yellow hair falling over his coat collar, sat impatiently rubbing the saddle-horn with his card-itching fingers.

The dusk seeped across the land around them. An early moon laid a frozen-hued light over the harsh outlines of the town, made the range shimmer as if a pale carpet was spread over it.

Cinco Cowley saw none of that. He just saw the glow of the yellow coal-oil lamp hanging out in front of the town's big saloon and gambling hall. In his mind he saw the things that were going to happen there.

He leaned from the kak and shoved a handful of *marijuana* cigarettes at Ben Seward. Cinco had been hoarding them for just this night ever since his pony had led the way back across the yellow reaches of the Rio.

Young Seward grabbed at them eagerly, promptly spat out the tobacco stub he'd been nursing and lit one of the *marijuana* smokes. He didn't know where he was. His drug-and-mescal-numbed mind didn't remember the country, the town.

Swivel swung one of his trick-slung guns and nodded over at Cinco. Two-Deck Dodds moved a hand toward the tail of his frayed frock coat, where he toted a hideout deck. A deck with the sides of the aces carefully whittled down so that his delicate, sensitive fingers could single them out in a deal.

Pinto sat speculatively eying a steel-dust mare at a hitch-rail at the end of the town. But he'd be ready when the gunplay came.

"I wonder if Johnny'll be all right?" Cinco mused.

"Sure," said Swivel.

"Nothing but a busted shoulder," said Pinto.

They were right behind him in anything, Cinco knew. They knew what had been done to him. They didn't blame him. Ben Seward was a fugitive from justice, anyway. They were hard men, men who'd been cast out by the law, forced to mete out their own, rough justice. They savvied how Cinco felt. Both the Siloms were dead. No chance of making them talk and squaring him.

They were going down to that gambling hell. Two-Deck was going to move into the game where Ben Seward would be playing. Two-Deck was going to see that Ben won. Won and won. Then Two-Deck was going to get the deal, slip Ben a fifth ace. He'd be called. And Ben Seward could flip a gun like a cornered rat when he was hopped up on enough *marijuana*. He'd drill the man who called him on that extra ace.

Cinco smiled thinly and bitterly as he thought of it. Swivel would take care of the house man. And he himself would take care of Ben Seward, jamming a gun in his back and turning him over to the law. To be held and tried and sentenced by his own father.

"Let's get going," Ben Seward whined impatiently.

Cinco nodded. "We'll drift in separate. Look better. You go ahead, Ben."

"Don't call me 'Ben'!" the judge's son snarled, never forgetting that charge against him in the Panhandle. "Whitey Ward's my name!"

He picked up the reins and rode off. The other four waited.

"Up in the Big House," Swivel said, "they ain't particular about names."

They watched Ben Seward reach the gambling spot, then jump off his pony and run in, clutching the money Cinco had given him under his shirt, leaving his horse unhitched.

"Tsh, tsh!" said Pinto. "Man shouldn't do that. Horse might wander off and he'd think maybe somebody had stole it!"

Another horse was coming—from behind, across the range. Coming hard, hoofs tattooing out a desperate beat. The other three sidled behind the boulder, but Cinco merely pulled his hat lower and waited. The rider emerged from the dusk, hanging to the horse's neck, sliding around in the saddle like a sack.

"Cinco!"

It was Montana Johnny. He slid from the saddle and Cinco hit the ground and grabbed him before he crumpled. Montana clutched his shoulder in its crude sling and stifled a groan between his teeth.

"That Hatcher—his head cleared up," he ground out. "He got things straight, about what he heard when he was in the jail. Cassor and his bunch are going to take care of the judge." He grinned weakly.

Cinco's lips tightened. "How? What?" Montana Johnny took a swig of the bottle Pinto held to his mouth, coughed.

"Cassor and his men," he panted. "Seems the judge has been gambling a heap. His *dinero's* all gone somewhere and he's been trying to get more—with the cards!"

CHAPTER IV

Crooked Game

CASSOR, the peace officer, Montana Johnny related hurriedly, was ambitious. He wanted to run the town. He wanted to do away with the judge, so he could run it his own way. But the judge had quit playing cards, suspicious of the local dealer. So Cassor had made arrangements.

Through his brother in the next county, he was having a new dealer come in who was going to cold-deck the judge. But not in the usual way. He was going to slip the judge an extra card from another deck, then call him on it.

Cinco couldn't believe his ears. It looked like Fate had drawn chips in his game. It was the same way he'd planned to fix the judge's son. But there was one difference.

"When the gunplay starts," Montana Johnny said, "Cassor and his two deputies'll see to it that the judge stops lead—from behind."

That was the scheme Red Hatcher had overheard in the jail, the reason they'd tried to kill him. Cassor didn't know this new gambler coming in. Just knew his name would be Diamond and that he'd be riding a paint horse. That he'd slope in sometime during the night, as if he were passing through.

Montana Johnny clenched his teeth, groaned, and summoned another wan smile. "Now you won't have to do it, Cinco! They'll take care of the judge for you. You'll turn back now, won't you, Cinco?"

Cinco plucked the cigarette from his mouth and pinched out the live coal with hard, unfeeling fingers. His face went masklike again. He hated Mills Seward. But he had his code of justice—just as the judge had his. And Mills Seward had always dealt that justice fairly—as he saw it.

Now, when he lay dead on the gambling-hall floor, he'd be branded a double-crossing cheat by the cards that fell from his dead hand. Branded a tinhorn, a cold-decker, reviled as he lay shot from behind. And the judge had always played square, according to his own beliefs. Cinco knew that.

His hands taloned over his tied-down guns. Then they came away slowly, trembling.

"Gambler name of Diamond," he muttered, "Riding a paint horse. We're goin' in just the same, boys. Pinto, you're borrowing a paint horse somewheres. Two-Deck, your name's going to be Diamond. You'll be the new dealer. And the judge wins, and don't get caught with no cold-decked cards!"

His hands went to the ivory butts of the Colts again, then jerked away as if they were poison. For his triggers were tied. He couldn't use them against the judge that night.

Tension seemed to press the ceiling lower and lower on the smoke-thick atmosphere of the sprawling gambling hall. Nobody could remember the last time anyone had laughed. There was just the click of chips, the rattle of a glass, the low, hoarse voices of the five around the table, occasionally a loco-toned word from the ring of men hemming the players.

It had been the usual run-of-the-night game until a couple of hours ago. Then a newcomer had come in, patting down his flowered vest and allowing to all the sundry as to how he was a gambler and craving action. Diamond was the name, he'd said. And Cinco had seen Big Frank, the deputy, who'd trailed the newcomer in from outside and seen his paint pony, give Cassor at the bar a nod.

The house dealer, as prearranged, had slid out. Two-Deck Dodds had taken his chair, had shot Ben Seward a warning look. Young Seward blinked stupidly. He was too drugged up to recognize anything but the faces of the cards. Then the judge had sauntered over from the bar, watched for a while, then sat in. Ben Seward's appearance was so changed that even his father did not recognize him.

Men had grown hawk-eyed, silent, forgetting drinks, swearing at the mechanical piano until it was turned off. For the stakes had mounted. Play seemed to concentrate between the gambler and the judge and Ben Seward. And the judge was winning, slowly at first, but steadily.

Cinco's lips tightened as he stood a few feet from the peace officer, Cassor, watching. It was a ghoulish setup—father and son sitting at the same table, battling each other, not knowing each other.

"Jacks and treys, gentlemen," said the judge, as the yellow-haired Ben Seward, a stranger to those townsmen, called him. "Beat them? . . . No."

With a slight smile, he raked in the pot.

THE cards slithered out in a fresh deal. Two-Deck had already run his own deck into the game when he'd swapped it quickly for a fresh deck that had been called for from the bar. Ben Seward edged up the corners of his cards, slid two away. Two-Deck gave him two.

The judge sat like a statue, said. "One." It came over.

Cinco, waiting for the break he knew Cassor and his men would make, saw young Seward's mouth jerk, saw him draw deep on his *marijuana* cigarette. The next instant, his elbow jerked, spilling his drink. He grabbed for the glass as it rolled from the table.

Seconds tolled off. The judge kept raising, Two-Deck following along with him. Ben Seward upped it twice. Then the judge was called.

Cards went down. Too late Cinco yelled out. As he glimpsed the cards, he realized what had happened, why Ben Seward had dumped that glass. In the confusion, he'd snaked a card

from his cuff.

"Four kings wins, I believe, gentlemen," the judge said with calm dignity. "If it doesn't—"

Ben Seward's cards hit the table with a smack as he flipped them out with a gloating hand. The nine, ten, jack, queen—and *king*—of hearts! Five kings in the deck!

"What the hell?" bellowed Cassor, storming forward. "Make the judge turn up the backs of his cards!"

He thought it was the cue, that his hired gambler, Diamond, had turned the trick.

The judge jerked straight out of his chair. Big Frank elbowed an onlooker from his path and ran in from behind. A thin man with a star on his vest, the other deputy, spat the straw out of his mouth, reached for his gun.

Cinco Cowley's right-hand Colt tore into action with a hoarse bark that smashed that second deputy's gun arm against his side.

Hell broke loose then. The barroom became an inferno of spitting guns, slashing stabs of flame-shot powder, cursing men, crashing down furniture.

"Get the judge, that crooked—" Cassor began.

Cinco triggered lead his way, missed as Cassor dived behind a table. Cinco went to a knee as a slug clipped the calf of his leg, scurried crab fashion behind a post.

At the other side of the room, Swivel Hustor slapped down one of his butts, drilled the house man where he sat, owl-like, on his high stool. Over at the bar, Pinto reached out with a long arm, grabbed the bartender's neck as he sought to hoist a shotgun, yanked him forward, battered his nose with a gun-barrel blow. It had hardly landed when he jerked up on tip-toe, clasping his ribs. He turned and sat down slowly.

Cinco got both his weapons into action, drove the swaggering Big Frank behind the end of the piano. The hall had cleared. It was Cinco and his men against Cassor and his deputies. Then the odds were changed as Ben Seward went loco gun-mad. He whirled and leaped on Swivel, slashed his head with a blow, smashed his gun out of his hand.

A slug gashed the post where Cinco crouched. He drew bead on the table behind which Cassor knelt, was rewarded with a howl as his slug pierced it. Then Montana Johnny breasted the batwing doors, reeled in.

Cinco jumped up and pushed him behind the corner of the bar. The next instant his nicked shoulder went numb and the gun in that hand clanged on the spur-scuffed floor. He twisted around, flinging up the other gun.

But Cassor had outsmarted him. The little judge, mopping at the blood that poured over his eyes from a shallow scratch, had stumbled back toward the table where Cassor hid. Cassor leaped up, sensing the situation, knowing that he had been crossed up somehow.

"Fog it, or I'll blast the judge to hell!" Cassor roared, bull-like body swaying on his pipestem legs as he held on to one wounded thigh.

He had the drop on them. Cinco heaved a dry sob, let the nose of his gun drop. Two-Deck, not much of a lead-slinger, stood staring at his emptied derringer.

Ben Seward, tottering drunkenly, pawed at his mouth. Into his eyes came a strange light. That name, "judge," had registered on his numbed mind. His father!

"Dad!" he croaked, and leaped forward.

Cassor thought the yellow-haired stranger was trying to break up his play.

"I'll kill him—" he started. Then he triggered.

BEN SEWARD sort of doubled in mid-air, as if broken in two. His gun slipped down his leg, bounced off his boot already red with his own blood. Then he pitched floorward almost at Cassor's feet.

Cassor, sneering, suddenly twisted as if jerked from behind. For Cinco had snapped a hip-shot at him, caught him in the side. Cassor reared around again.

"My gun's empty! You can't shoot me now!"

Cinco hobbled toward him, his face a mask behind the curling smoke from his weapon. The next instant, Cassor's other hand had snagged a hideout from under his coat lapel, was whipping it around, cocked. It spattered, was joined by Big Frank's gun from over the piano.

Cinco slid to one knee as lead horneted past his head, his spur rattling on a spittoon. Then he triggered twice. Cassor seemed to sink onto his toothpick-like legs. They slid out sideward. His great body crashed down, fell over Ben Seward's, dead.

Big Frank threw down his guns and edged out from the piano, hands high, whimpering as Cinco rose. Another figure rubbed against Cinco's side. It was the judge, fierce old eyes cleared, his Frontier-model Colt still smoking from the slug he'd dispatched into Cassor's frame along with Cinco's hail of lead. His cracked but steady voice broke the silence. "My boy," he muttered. "He died for me."

"Yeah," said Cinco.

"Went straight at last—like you did, Cinco! Yes, I knew it was you when I drove in this morning. You stood there just like your dad used to stand. I didn't say anything. I wanted to see how you were going to play them. Now I know. Like your dad—square and fair!"

And Cinco Cowley, as Montana Johnny came up to steady him with an arm, smiled, glad his triggers had been tied against the judge.

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Wyatt swung low, shooting underneath the pony's neck

BADLAND CROSSTRAILS

By RUSSELL A. BANKSON

It's doublecross or be doublecrossed on this lawless range!

STEVE WYATT — "Straight-Shot Steve"—draped the reins across the pommel of the saddle in front of him. He said to the blue-and-white pinto filly beneath the saddle: "Keep shufflin' them feet of yours, Tonta gal, or I and you'll go to bed with empty bellies. And neither of us got any more belt tucks."

Wyatt then took a silver dollar from a pocket and held it in the palm of his left hand; and with his right he took a five-dollar gold piece out of another pocket.

"Tonta baby," he said solemnly, as though the pinto understood, "I'm layin' five against your one that we don't find the Boxed Bar spread on the other side of yon ridge." Then he added wistfully, "Only I hope to gosh I lose!"

For forty miles through the Inchelium badlands, blistering under the torrid sun—through most of an endless day's weary travel, while Tonta's steps grew shorter, slower —Steve Wyatt had played this game

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with the pinto. He had drawn up the notches in his belt one by one, until he had reached the end. He had won steadily from Tonta because the next ridge never revealed the Boxed Bar, until now the original collection of coins allotted to the pinto was down to a single solitary silver dollar. The game had kept his mind off food and water; but not altogether away from the mysterious, secretive job waiting for him at the Boxed Bar; and the money which it promised.

"I hear you're known as Straight-Shot Steve," said the letter which had come to him from old Colonel Menchee, owner of the Boxed Bar, "and that will be your job, to shoot straight—and fast! Now as to arriving at the Boxed Bar. Don't come in by the front way, so to speak. That is, by way of the town of Rattler Run. I don't aim that certain hombres should know you're coming. Start from Malden, over to the east, and ride straight across the badlands. Keep your eyes on Eagle Butte, which you'll know because the top looks like an eagle's head. You can't miss the Boxed Bar that way. I'll be waiting for you."

"Keep goin' and you can't miss it!" Wyatt said disgustedly, wishing that there was another notch in his belt. Early in the morning he had picked up Eagle Butte in the dim distance, and all day long he had kept it in front of him, until he hated the sight of it.

"Well, here goes!" Tonta covered the last steep pitch to the top of the ridge and Steve Wyatt craned his neck—and took a deep breath. Below them lay a beautiful little valley, golden brown with rich hay, and studded with a tiny lake that glittered like a diamond in the slanting rays of the setting sun. But what was vastly more important was the cluster of ranch buildings nestling almost at their feet.

"The Boxed Bar!" he exulted. "Grub and rest. Right on a straight line with the old eagle's head!"

Tonta strained at the bit, sniffing eagerly at the water. But now that the goal was in sight, Wyatt showed restraint. First of all, he conscientiously placed the five-dollar gold piece with the silver dollar and shoved them into a pocket. "Tonta dove," he said, "you win by big odds."

Then he looked the spread over. Something mighty odd about the job.

It had come to him while he was loafing around Malden, waiting for something to turn up. He did not know Colonel Menchee, though he had heard of him and his Boxed Bar. The letter from the colonel had been slipped into his hand in a saloon. He hadn't even seen the messenger; but from the tone of it, it had plenty of gunpowder wrapped up in it. If not, why had he been instructed to approach the Boxed Bar by so devious and difficult a route? Taking these things into consideration, it was worth his time to pause on the ridge, and give a moment's study to what lay below him.

He saw several saddle horses clustered near the corral, as though the buckaroos had just come in off the range. And with his appearance on the ridge, two men hurried down from the bunkhouse and flung themselves across the leather, spurring their way up the slope toward him. Their coming was so sudden that it was apparent they had been watching for him. Their speed meant one thing—trouble.

Giving Tonta a bit of rein, he moved on to meet the pair, watching them closely from between slitted lids. There was something about them he didn't like.

THE riders drew up in front of him. They were a hard-looking pair. The large man, dark-eyed and heavy-browed, scowled as he sized up Steve Wyatt. He noted the dust and the weariness of hard travel upon Wyatt. The other was an expressionless, hatchet-faced hombre

with shifty green eyes. Each of them wore twin .45s in crossed holsters, the same as Wyatt.

"Must of rode like the devil, gettin' here so quick!" the larger man said. "And you ain't no he-lookin' hombre like I'd reckoned on."

"I'll take care of myself!" Wyatt answered tightly. He didn't like the sneering reception they were giving him.

"Change the tone of your voice!" the other snarled, starting for a gun in a lightning draw. He was fast, but before he had more than touched the butt of his six-shooter, by some kind of unseen miracle, he was staring down twin muzzles that had the pair of them covered, dead center, on their hearts.

"Crawfish, you sidewinders!" Steve Wyatt flung out. "I and Tonta ain't in a playful mood!"

To his surprise, the bigger man let his gun slide back into its leather nest, and a twisted leer broke the lines of his broad face. The lesser of the pair did not change his expression throughout the tableau, except that his green eyes became brighter.

"You'll do!" said the leader. "You looked soft; I had to find out."

"And who are you, passin' judgment on me?" Steve Wyatt coldly demanded.

"Joe Struble, boss of this outfit," was the answer. "This is Poker Face Leech—a bad hombre with a gun!"

"He don't look like so much to me," said Wyatt icily. "What's the special job you got lined up for me?"

Struble looked at him hard. "No use beatin' 'round the bush," he said. "You're hired for one job. You'll draw your dinero when it's done. You're gonna kill Colonel Menchee!"

"Kill Col—" An involuntary exclamation of surprise burst from Wyatt's lips, but he stifled the words.

"Have any objections?" the foreman caught him up. Again he was studying Wyatt in a puzzled way.

"Why should I?" the newcomer countered. But he was thinking: "Somethin's wrong, Steve, me lad, take her easy. Find out what's on the other side of the fence before you jump!" So he went on aloud: "I'm here, ain't I?"

"Yeah. Come on, grub up first."

"That sounds right interestin'. Me'n Tonta's plumb hungry."

As the three of them went down the slope Steve Wyatt noted another strange thing. Joe Struble and "Poker Face" Leech rode horses with Diamond K brands on their rumps; Colonel Menchee's brand was the Boxed Bar. It might mean nothing, but it was odd. He kept his mouth shut, but his ears were wide open, and his eyes, that might have seemed sleepy, missed nothing.

At the corral he saw more Diamond K horses. And he met more tough-looking buckaroos who were packing two guns. They eyed him with distant hostility, offering nothing in the way of encouragement toward conversation. Around the mess it was the same way. He sat near the head, beside Joe Struble, midst a deep silence. And being thus undisturbed, Straight-Shot Steve let his thoughts have their way. He wondered about Colonel Menchee. A bit strange that he hadn't put in an appearance yet.

Finally he ventured a question to Struble.

"Where at do I meet up with the colonel on this job?" he asked.

Struble stopped to glare at him, with a shovel of food half-way to his mouth. "You'll find out plenty soon enough," he growled.

Steve thought: "I wonder could I be in the wrong spread? Them Diamond K horses, and a outfit like this—" He ate on in silence for a spell, still listening for some word to be dropped that would set him straight.

WHEN they began to get up from the table the surly Poker Face Leech bumped against

Wyatt. It was a deliberate, hostile move, but Wyatt let it pass. The man gave an ugly laugh and others joined him. Steve Wyatt felt the hot blood climbing up along his neck and into his tanned cheeks, but he held his temper. Then Joe Struble spoke to him impatiently.

"You g o t work to do," he said. "Come on!"

Poker Face Leech sneered aloud. "Shoulda got a real man, Joe. This here coyote's got his tail between his legs. He'll muff it on you!"

That was an insult no self-respecting buckaroo could take. Poker face Leech already had a hand on his gun, and he started dragging it out. Steve Wyatt let him get it clear of the leather. Apparently his eyes were fixed upon a sparrow hawk in a swift flight overhead, dangling a mouse in its talons. Then he did something with his hands, no one saw what it was. But there were two sharp blasts that sounded like one, followed by a staccato stutter of barking guns—both of them in the hands of Straight-Shot Wyatt.

IN THE first instance, two things happened. The gun was torn violently from Poker Face Leech's hand and plopped in the dust; and up in the sky the hawk crumpled, letting loose of the mouse.

Giving no attention whatever to the cursing Poker Face, Steve Wyatt alternated shots, keeping the lifeless body of the hawk bouncing up and down in the air until both chambers were empty, and the predatory bird was cut to shreds that showered down on the heads of the watchers. Then with his back squarely to the hatchet-faced, snarling Leech, he recharged the cylinders of his two guns, shoved them carelessly into their holsters, and moved on beside Joe Struble.

"Danged fool!" Struble muttered. "Poker Face won't like that."

"Won't like what?" Wyatt asked.

Struble grunted. "You can shoot," h e grudgingly admitted. "A n d Shorty says you got plenty of nerve, which I reckon you have."

"Shorty?" Steve caught himself again, remembering the way the message had been delivered to him. He thought swiftly: "It sounds like I'm settin' in the wrong pew." But he didn't dare ask any direct questions that might arouse suspicions. "Sure," he said cautiously. "Spill the layout."

"The Diamond K is the main stopover station on the rustlers' trail through the badlands," Struble went on frankly. "Well, old Colonel Menchee and his Boxed Bar outfit is gettin' in our way, and we gotta clean 'em out. Nobody can get near there, though. Then Shorty—you know, the barkeep at the Lobo, in Malden—gets a break for us. One of Menchee's riders is in town, and Shorty sees he's got something on his mind mighty secretive, so he likkers him up, and finds out he's packin' a letter from the Colonel to a gunnin' hombre named Straight-Shot Steve Wyatt, biddin' him sneak into the Boxed Bar across the badlands—wihch m e a n s Menchee's brewin' poison against us.

"But we beat him to the draw on that. Shorty lets him go ahead and deliver his letter, after a three-day drunk. But while that's goin' on, Shorty sends Pitts down here to tell us the set-up, and that he's rushin' Pete Coe over to Hideout for you, to start you for the Diamond K, pronto. I wasn't expectin' you much before daylight. But it's all the better, you're here now, Two-Gun.

"I heard a lot about Two-Gun Jergins, and I'm glad to meet up with you at last. Well, that's the size of it. Shorty says Colonel Menchee don't know you neither. You're in here ahead of this Straight-Shot Steve Wyatt, who's comin' across the badlands. An' seein' he ain't knowed to the colonel neither, why you'll lie in wait and ambush him, take his papers and outfit, and ride on into the Boxed Bar with his moniker hooked onto you."

"Yeah," Wyatt nodded, "I see. And

what comes next?" He didn't give himself away, but all of a sudden he understood everything. He had made some kind of a mistake on the badland cross-trails and had ridden boldly into the rustlers' roost. And he was still alive because he had been mistaken for a hammer-fanning powder burner by the name of "Two-Gun" Jergins. "And I gotta play the hand out!" he thought quickly. "If these birds knowed the truth, hell would pop!"

Struble chuckled. "You'll git over onto the Eagle Butte trail, Two-Gun, and lay for this Straight-Shot Steve," he said. "We coulda ambushed him, but with you takin' his place, you'll get inside of the Boxed Bar. You'll play along with Colonel Menchee till you get a chance to drill him. With the colonel dead, the Boxed Bar won't have no more ambitions to bust up our business. You'll collect your dinero after the job's done."

Steve Wyatt acted unconcerned. "And where would this here Eagle Butte trail be?" he questioned. "I ain't no wise familiar with this country."

THE foreman gave him another sharp look. Then he jerked his head toward the south. "Can't miss it, once you pick it up," he grunted. "Eagle Butte looks somethin' like Buzzard Butte, over yonder past the Diamond K."

Again light came to Steve. Eagle Butte! Buzzard Butte! He had been stalking the wrong bird across the badlands.

"I get it," he said, easily enough. "Only how you gonna know I done my job?"

"The colonel will play along with you, see, on account of you bein' somebody special he's sent for," Joe Struble explained. "Get him to ride alone with you. Then after you've plugged him, f e t c h his body over to Black Canyon, and send up a smoke signal from the top of Eagle Butte. We'll come and take a look. I'll pay you—if you've got your man."

AFTER a rest and a good feed Tonta and Straight-Shot Steve left the Diamond K at an easy lope, and faded into the gathering dusk of the badlands.

Steve Wyatt rode steadily, following the trail which had led him to this place. Darkness fell, but with it came a full moon, so that the badlands were bathed in a silvery glow. The farther he went, the more cautious he became. Near midnight, he reached the crosstrails where he had become confused. He got down and looked for tracks. No one had used either trail recently, except himself. The man he was to meet had not yet come that way. He took up a position behind a cluster of boulders overlooking the crosstrails, where he waited.

Near dawn a rider came toward him at an easy pace, from the direction of Malden. Wyatt's lithe muscles grew tense. When the newcomer was opposite him, he spurred into the trail, cutting him off.

"Stick 'em up!" he barked.

A blast of gunfire answered him. Wyatt was not surprised at this, and he was ready for it. He pirouetted Tonta and swung low to one side, shooting underneath the pony's neck. The nightrider pitched from his saddle and piled up on the ground. Instantly Steve Wyatt was down beside him, bending over him. He was dead.

A quick search of the man's clothing revealed a letter indicating that he was Two-Gun Jergins. He quickly took possession of this, substituting for it, in a pocket of the other's clothes, the letter which Colonel Menchee had sent him. Then he swung back into his saddle.

This had not been done a moment too soon, for two riders were thundering toward him from the direction of the Diamond K. He had been aware all the time that he was being followed; now he waited with ap-

parent calm, for the arrival of the riders. He was out in the open when Joe Struble and Poker Face Leech came up. They had him covered, but he laughed at them and told them to put their guns away.

"Come on, boys," he greeted. "The first part of the job's done!"

"We wanted to make sure this Straight-Shot Steve didn't get you," the foreman growled, peering into Wyatt's face, gun still in hand. They saw the dead man on the ground. Poker Face kept Wyatt covered, as Struble slid down and bent over the form.

"I got you figgered for a double-crossin' skunk," Poker Face told him. "If it's what I think, I'm gonna put a hunk of lead through you!"

The foreman went through the dead man's clothes and found the letter Steve had planted there. He struck matches until he had finished reading it, then he shoved his gun back in its holster.

"I knew you were crazy in the head," he snarled at Poker Face. "This here's Wyatt, down here, all right. Here's the letter he got from Menchee. We had all that ridin' for nothin' like I told you we would."

"Yeah?" Leech sneered. "Well, how do we know this hombre's Jergins? He ain't showed us anything to prove it, has he?"

"I guess you won't mind me goin' through your pockets," Struble said. "Poker Face is ornery on account of the way you kinda riled him up, when you was showin' off your shootin' back there."

Wyatt raised his arms and the foreman went through his pockets and found the letter he had taken from the dead Two-Gun Jergins. He looked at it in the light of a match and turned upon Poker Face.

"Anything else you got on your mind?" he demanded. It was hard for Leech to resist the urge to kill Steve, for making a fool out of him, but under the foreman's hard glance, he held his fire. Steve Wyatt knew how close to death he had been in that instant, and a prickly chill went down his spine. Struble tore up the letter belonging to the dead gunman and threw it away. Then he handed Steve back his own letter from Colonel Menchee.

"Put that in your pocket," he growled. "You may have to show it to prove you're Steve Wyatt. And if you got anything else on you that'd give you away as Two-Gun, why you better chuck it."

Wyatt lowered his hands with relief. Then he swung up across the saddle on Tonta. "Well, I only had the letter, so I guess I'll be on my way," he said, with an easy wave of his hand. His back was to the two outlaws as he rode on down the trail toward the Boxed Bar. Straight thinking, quick action and a lot of nerve had saved him in a bad pinch.

HE PICKED up Eagle Butte at dawn, and rode straight for it. And as he moved along at a jogging pace, he let his thoughts race on ahead of him. His lean young face broke into a wide grin. He took the five-dollar gold piece and a silver dollar from his pocket, and addressed Tonta.

"Betcha five bucks I and you ain't out of this thing yet," he said.

About sunup he saw a rider silhouetted against the skyline. Moving steadily on, he was aware of being watched, though he gave no sign. Then in a deep coulee he was stopped by a sharp command from an unseen person who spoke with positive authority.

"Stand still and make yourself known!"

"Who're you, first?" he countered calmly, drawing rein.

"You're on Boxed Bar range. Talk fast!"

"That's where I'm aimin' to be. Name's Steve Wyatt."

"Straight-Shot Steve?"

"The same. And I'd speak with Colonel Menchee."

"Anything to prove who you are?"

the arrogant voice insisted.

"This letter from the colonel himself," Wyatt answered cheerfully, holding the missive up to view. "Come and take a squint, hombre."

"You're well covered from every direction," the voice went on. Then, out from behind a nest of boulders the man came, riding straight up to the young gunman. He glanced at the letter, and nodded his head. As though this were a signal, a dozen other riders appeared suddenly from sheltering angles of rock and brush, and he was in the center of a cavalcade of Boxed Bar buckaroos. But the one who had been addressing him needed no introduction. He was an elderly man with snow white hair and spiked, sharp-pointed beard. His clear, steady eyes and his hard muscles belied his age.

"You'll do!" he snapped, as he sized up Steve Wyatt. "I'm Menchee. Welcome to the Boxed Bar—and plenty of gun trouble, Wyatt!"

"Reckoned as much," the younger man said easily. "What's up?"

"Ain't one to beat around the bush, Wyatt. You're known as Straight-Shot Steve, that's why I sent for you. There's a den of thievin' outlaws in these parts. We ain't been able to break through their shell. Bein' you're a stranger in these parts, I'm hiring you to squirm into the Diamond K on your rep as a two-gunner. When you get there you'll put a muzzle to their leader. Works under the name of Joe Struble, and he has a killer named Poker Face Leech with him. Put 'em out of the way, and the rest of the outfit'll holler for mercy. Reckon you could handle it? Good pay!"

"Mebbe I could," said Steve Wyatt quietly. "Mebbe I could do that."

The next day Steve Wyatt climbed up on top of Eagle Butte and looked the badlands over. Below him he could see the big spread of the Boxed Bar. All was quiet there. He put his glasses to his eyes, and focused the lenses on a distant valley. He could just make out the buildings of the Diamond K. He saw riders about the place, and a drove of cattle coming in from the east. A new drive of rustled beef on its way to the south. He raised the glasses and examined Buzzard Butte. He could see nothing of any special interest there. But he knew that on top of Buzzard Butte one of Joe Struble's lookouts was stretched prone, in the blistering sun, watching the badlands. He was waiting for a signal from the Boxed Bar.

Quite deliberately Straight-Shot Steve gathered mesquite stalks and sagebrush and piled them into a neat little heap on top of the butte, and touched a match to them. A column of bluish smoke rose steadily into the sky. He let it burn for a moment, then using a saddle blanket he stifled it. When the air was cleared again, he lifted the blanket, and sent a ball of condensed smoke rolling upward. He repeated this operation several times. Then he kicked the fire out and climbed back down off the butte to where Tonta was waiting in a coulee. But before he left the butte, he saw an answering smoke signal flare up into the sky from the top of Buzzard Butte. Struble's sentinel had seen his signal.

Across Tonta, he set the blue-and-white pinto to a jogging pace that carried him around the Boxed Bar spread, toward the west and south, in the general direction of the Diamond K. An hour before this, he had been riding alone with Colonel Menchee, up in the vicinity of Black Canyon, but the colonel was nowhere in sight now.

In a deep coulee not far from Black Canyon, Wyatt left Tonta again, and climbed back in among the rocks to where a horse was hidden. It was saddled and bridled. On its rump was branded the Boxed Bar of Colonel Menchee and the horse was known throughout that country as the colonel's favorite saddle pony. A little way from where it was tethered, Steve pushed some boulders

aside, and revealed the body of a dead man. It was wrapped loosely in canvas.

Working methodically, quietly, Steve Wyatt lifted the limp form up and carried it to the pony, draping it across the saddle. Using rawhide thongs, he tied the dangling arms to the saddle on one side, and the legs on the other side. Then he led the pony out into the coulee, where Tonta snorted and backed away, until Wyatt spoke sharply to her.

CLIMBING up across the leather on Tonta, with the reins of the other horse knotted and hooked over the horn of his saddle, he sat slack-hipped and smoked. Then he straightened up and spoke to the pinto. The little caravan with its gruesome burden moved slowly down the coulee, heading toward Black Canyon.

On the way Steve reached into a pocket and brought forth the gold piece and some silver. He addressed the pinto. "Lay you odds that very soon we'll collect a wad of kale from this here Joe Struble hombre!"

He was calm and unconcerned about it all. There might not have been a dead man tied across the saddle of the horse he was leading. Approaching the meeting place at Black Canyon, he drew back into the protecting angle of a cliff, and waited. Then, in the distance, he saw a large cavalcade of riders coming toward the mouth of the canyon, from the direction of the Diamond K. Joe Struble was in the lead, and Poker Face Leech was close to his side.

The outfit was approaching cautiously, with their hands on their gun butts. Tugging at the reins of the pony he was leading, Straight-Shot Steve Wyatt spoke to Tonta, and moved boldly out into the open.

Struble and the others saw him at once, and halted. Slit-eyed and hard-faced, they watched him as he moved in an unhurried manner toward them bringing the dead man across the saddle of the lead pony. Struble was scowling, as was his habitual characteristic; Poker Face Leech's countenance was as expressionless as a cow's, though a murderous flame burned in his eyes. Steve knew that there was going to be a showdown between them within the next few minutes.

"See you got my signal," he said casually. "Bring the dinero for the payoff on this job?"

"Yeah, good work, Two-Gun." Struble sized up the limp form hanging over the saddle, and the pony which he recognized. His eyes were gloating. He reached into his pocket and brought out a buckskin money pouch. "Have much trouble?"

"Not so far, I ain't," Straight-Shot Wyatt answered. He was watching Poker Face Leech—watching the play of deadly fires in his eyes.

"You fool!" Poker Face snarled at Joe Struble. "You gonna pay over the dinero before you even got a look at the dead hombre?"

"I thought mebbe you'd think of that, Leech," Steve said. He shrugged. "Go ahead and satisfy yourself."

Poker Face Leech edged over. He reached down and pulled the canvas back from the head of the dead man. Then he straightened with a jerk, his hand diving swiftly for his gun.

"Like I figgered all the time, you dirty doublecrosser!" he swore, as Struble and the rest of his crew began to drag steel, before they even knew what was wrong. "That ain't Colonel Menchee! It's the hombre you blasted down at the crosstrails. It's Two-Gun Jergins! And this bird's Straight-Shot Wyatt!"

Steve Wyatt let him get his gun clear of the leather, while he was screeching out his charges. Then as Poker Face Leech had witnessed once before, something happened. Nobody saw Wyatt's hand move. Yet he was sitting there in his saddle with two guns out in front—and one of them had exploded. Only this

time it was not Poker Face Leech's gun that went tumbling to the ground. It was Poker Face himself, with a big, round .45 bullet-hole between his eyes.

Joe Struble still had a surprised expression on his face. But he was bringing his gun up, when a ring of men stood up from behind boulders and mesquite, completely hemming in the outlaws.

And they were looking down the bores of tilted muzzles.

Colonel Menchee, with white hair and spiked beard, stepped out into the circle. He had Struble covered.

"That's right!" he said to the leader of the outlaws. "You're buyin' back your own man, instead of me, Struble. It's a case where Straight-Shot Steve Wyatt done some straight shootin'—for law and order in the badlands!"

Joe Struble stared at Poker Face Leech where he lay on the ground with a bullet hole through his head and a twisted sneer on his face.

"Mebbe I'm lucky I wasn't as smart as him," he muttered. "He's dead, and I ain't."

"Tonta, baby," Straight-Shot Steve Wyatt said to the blue-and-white pinto, "you lose your bet again. Joe Struble's gonna pay—in full!"

THOSE CARD-SHARP BLUES

A True Story of Arizona

by

SIMPSON M. RITTER

HIS company sent Peter Stuyvesant van Buren west in 1882 to check the market possibilities of a new line of household goods. Peter found the Arizona weather pleasant but the population less balmy toward an Easterner. Back home, van Buren had something of a reputation as a parlor magician, especially with playing cards and coins.

One night, sitting in on a poker game at the Blue Cat, a combination hotel and saloon in Flagstaff, Arizona, he caught on to the sleight-of-hand maneuvers of the professional gambler banking the game.

As soon as the hand was over, van Buren interrupted the game.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I'd like to show you some tricks that can be performed with a simple deck of cards." He looked directly at the professional gambler as he spoke. Van Buren picked up the deck and proceeded to shuffle it in an unusual fashion. He asked one of the men to cut the deck. The cut was made.

"Here," said Van Buren, picking up the deck and handing it to the gambler, "take off the top five cards. You'll find it an interesting assortment."

The five top cards proved to be the winning hand the gambler had had in the last play. The coincidence was noted by all.

"It's really quite simple," said Van Buren and demonstrated the trick very slowly to the assembled group. Suspicion formed in several minds.

"That is the correct way to do it, isn't it?" van Buren pointedly asked the professional. The professional's protests went unnoticed as five burly men piled into him!

In the weeks following van Buren found his new Western neighbors far more friendly than formerly.

Buff Corrigan had lunged forward, his big hand stopping down on the killer's wrist

CANYON of

By C. WILLIAM

CHAPTER I

Gun Trap

THREE days in the saddle, the last one without food, hadn't helped the kid's already seedy appearance. White patches of fuzzy beard sprouted on his lean, jutting chin, and his pale eyes, hollow from lack of sleep, shifted furtively around the big saloon room at hard-eyed men who stared at him with a bleak lack of emotion.

At the end of the long whisky-stained mahogany bar, three men were eying him covertly. One of them, a chunky-shouldered, barrel-chested man with a beer-flecked beard, was talking to the others behind a hairy hand.

The kid's eyes fluttered with nervous apprehension to the big man. They were strange eyes, the kid's, shifty now and heavy lidded, but a cold, steady light glittered in their grey depths.

For a month now "Rusty" Barton

Rusty Barton Stakes His Life for Justice

A NOVELET

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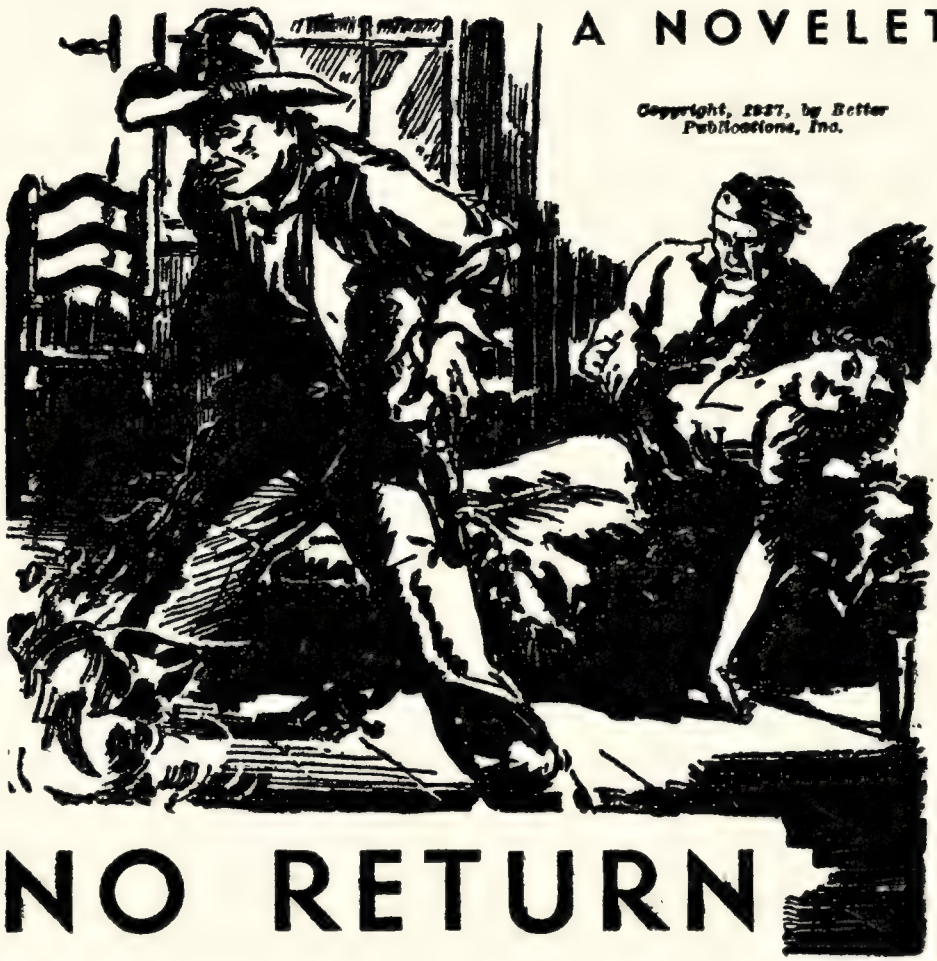

NO RETURN

HARRISON

had planned his entrance into "Bull" Corrigan's outlaw stronghold deep in the Guadalupe Mountains. But now that he was here, a cold chill of doubt trickled down his lanky frame.

Other lawmen had died trying to break into Corrigan's Hell Hole, as the narrow rock-walled canyon was known. Even grizzled old Jeff Spears, the United States Marshal who had been more a father to young Barton than a superior officer, had failed—and paid with his life.

Barton's gaunt, stringy body stiffened slightly as the thick-shouldered man pushed away from the other two and stalked across the floor toward him. An expectant silence hushed the undertone of voices that had filled the smoky room.

The big man, heavy-browed, glowering, halted a couple of strides from the stranger.

"Well, who are you?" he growled.

The kid edged away from the bar. His long-fingered right hand drifted down to the battered Colt tied low

When He Enters a Hellish Outlaw Hideout!

on his lean thigh.

"I didn't ask your name," he said coldly.

His eyes darted to the two men who had fanned up on either side of the big man. His lanky body hunkered down a little and his wide mouth narrowed to a grim slit.

Dark anger flooded the big man's jowls. His bearded face hardened and black, beady eyes brightened dangerously.

"I'm Mark Jeeter, Pilgrim," he said harshly. "You're off your range, and you got some talkin' to do."

The kid's eyes narrowed slightly. "Okay, mister," he drawled. "If it's any of your business, my name's Smith!"

His words brought a gritty chuckle from someone back in the room. Mark Jeeter's eyes puckered into slits.

"Yeah? Think again, fuzz-lip. Half of the guys in this room are named Smith."

"They're no kin of mine," said the kid coldly. "My name's still Smith."

JEETER'S meaty hand was slowly sinking down to his holstered six-gun. His breath was coming in a low wheeze.

"We also got several gunnies named Smith in our Boot Hill," he husked. "Most of them were lawmen. Maybe they're your kin, eh?"

A faint smile curled Barton's thin lips, and his stringy frame relaxed a little. He flashed a cool glance at the red-nosed bartender whose hands were hidden under the bar.

"Hell," he laughed shortly. "Why didn't you say that was what you wanted to know. I'd have answered you plumb pronto. The nearest I ever hope to be to a lawman was when I nosed out a sheriff's posse and rid into this valley. Your guard danged near plugged me, but that was a pleasure to what that law dog woulda done. Barton's my name, Rusty Barton, and I come from over yonder and back a ways."

Jeeter straightened slowly from his gun, but the scowl remained on his heavy face. His close-set eyes stared unblinkingly at the kid.

"Sheriff was after you, huh?" he grunted. "What for?"

Barton shrugged good-naturedly. "Nothin' much. My gun got stuck in my hand when I walked into a bank in Van Horn. The cashier plumb misunderstood and started throwing money to me. I was obliging and caught it, but just then the sheriff showed up with his hogleg hammering. My gun went off—reckon I was nervous. Anyway, he got killed. I been dodging posses ever since."

A greedy light kindled in Jeeter's eyes. He flashed a narrow glance to the men who sided him, then at the gawky kid, who was munching one of the bartender's free sandwiches.

Barton looked hardly more than an overgrown boy. His boots were worn down at the heels, and patched levis that might have been handed down from his elders were tucked in the boot tops. He wore a faded blue shirt and a shapeless old Stetson that was pushed back on a thatch of yellow hair.

"He tossed the money to you, huh?" Jeeter's eyes were narrowed calculatingly. "How much?"

Barton grinned ruefully. "Danged if I know," he admitted. "Musta been a lot, though. It lasted me three days against a card sharp over to Pecos before he trimmed me. I wouldn't be eating none of these stale sandwiches if I had some of it now."

The scowl returned to Jeeter's face and he growled hoarsely.

"Damned fool! You better rustle over and see if the boss'll let you stay. Me, I'd kick your pants for a loco maverick!"

Barton smiled faintly and turned his attention to the free sandwiches. But from under the broad brim of his hat, pale eyes shifted restlessly. They were a hard lot, the men who crowded in the Long Trail Saloon. Some of them he remembered from

"wanted" notices stuck on the wall of his office in Pecos.

A few painted women drifted among the men, laughing coarsely at their pointed banter. Mark Jeeter returned to the end of the bar with his two partners, and their heads bent together in low conversation. One of them, a skinny man with a cranelike neck, kept tilting his head back to peer over his shoulder at two men playing cards at a table on the far side of the room. The other, squatty, stump-bodied, stared fixedly at Jeeter, who was talking rapidly.

Under his broad-brimmed hat, Barton's eyes narrowed. When three hombres of their caliber got their heads together, only hell could be hatched. He mentally gauged each of them, and what he found made an icy light dance in his eyes.

He saw one of the card players look toward Jeeter casually, then drop his head in a slight nod. Barton's lean muscles warmed with a quickening surge of blood.

Trouble! He could smell it now. Not for himself, perhaps, but for the redhead who played opposite the signaling man. The lanky Deputy U. S. Marshal's attention fastened on the redhead. He was a tall, muscular man, with a wide, full forehead and a jutting chin. A fighter, that man, but a renegade buried in Bull Corrigan's Hell Hole.

Then the skinny man, followed by the stumpy fellow, pushed away from Jeeter and ambled across the room. The redhead looked up as they stopped beside the table. They spoke, and the redhead nodded with a strange lack of expression on his face.

BARTON'S lips twitched into a thin blade of a smile. Gun trap! And the redhead was the marked man. Then the smile planed down from his lips and he resolutely reached for another sandwich. It was none of his affair, he told himself. Let the redhead get killed. It would be one less for him to worry about when the showdown came.

An icy gleam crept into Barton's eyes as he remembered the singular mound of rocks—Jeff Spears' grave—he had seen in the gulch a mile from the rock-tortured trail that led to the Hell Hole. Corrigan's outlaws were a killer pack. Let them kill each other if they would.

The skinny man was dealing a slow round of cards, now. Barton found himself watching intently. There was something about the redhead that attracted his admiration, something in the grim tightening of jaw muscles that had come when the skinny man had dealt clumsily from the bottom of the deck.

Another was watching the game intently—Mark Jeeter, his puffy lips half open in a deadly grin.

Barton was mentally cursing himself. It was none of his affair, and a fool thing to do, but there was something about the redhead— He found himself walking toward the front door in an arc that would take him near the table.

And then it happened! A hoarse oath burst from the redhead's drawn lips.

"Burt, you crooked-dealing snake! That's twice you slipped me a card from the bottom of the deck!"

The redhead's sharp voice snapped tense silence over the saloon. The skinny man, Burt, jerked to his feet, spinning his chair backward in a flare of anger.

"That's a damned lie, Lesh!" he snarled.

Lesh was pushing slowly to his feet. His flaming hair seemed to flash sparks into his blue eyes. His glance darted between Burt and the other two players who were scrambling back from the table.

Barton halted, half turned toward the door, almost facing thick-lipped Mark Jeeter who was leaning stiffly against the bar.

"Reckon this is what you've been wanting, Burt," Lesh was saying in a hard voice. "It's your play now!"

Burt's snaky eyes fastened on the

redhead with savage intentness. He seemed to coil within himself, right hand quivering just over his holstered gun.

Barton had been waiting for it, but it came with a suddenness he hadn't expected. The stumpy man who had been scuttling for the wall stumbled, fell to the floor, rolling. At the same instant Burt's right hand snapped for his gun, and the redhead's draw, even faster, swooped, flipped upward.

Crash!

Barton's eyes chilled. That shot hadn't come from the redhead's gun, nor had it come from the skinny gunman. It came from down low, from the stumpy man on the floor.

That instant, the six-gun reigned. Burt's gun was settling for a shot at Lesh, who was sinking to the floor. But the killer held his fire too long.

Barton's Colt, battered and long-barreled, snaked upward in a blue blur, boomed heavily. Burt folded as if a battering-ram had smacked into his middle. His scrawny neck gave way and his head flopped loosely down to his chest as he toppled forward. Then Barton felt his hat tipped back on his head by an invisible hand.

Death! Close that time. None of his business, the whole damned affair, but—

He was chuckling in deadly mirth as his Colt swiveled, crashed again. On the floor the stumpy man began beating and kicking the air senselessly. Barton paid him no second glance; he knew where that shot had gone. He spun on his heel, covering the room with the gun whose muzzle trailed a wisp of smoke.

"Anybody want to take it up from here?" he drawled softly.

No one answered. They stared in bleak silence at the man who had been standing in front of them, but whose draw they hadn't seen.

But Mark Jeeter, his heavy jowls flushed, his puffy lips flattened in a wolfish grin, stared at Barton with deadly promise.

"You look like a kid," he said hoarsely, "but you ain't. Not by a damn sight! The boss'll be right glad to make your acquaintance."

Barton smiled thinly.

"He'll probably want to see you, too, Jeeter. Give you a promotion, maybe. That was a plumb neat murder you planned."

Flaring rage muddled Jeeter's eyes. He glared at the stranger a long moment, then turned and stalked stiffly out the front door.

CHAPTER II

Outlaws of Hell Hole

BARTON flashed a glance over the room, then bent to the redhead. He was still alive. The slug had struck high in the left shoulder. Blood was blotting his shirt front with red stain. Barton slid an arm under Lesh's waist. The redhead choked back a groan, but managed to get to his feet with the other's help.

"Damn fool!" Lesh muttered thickly. "Butting in like this—get yourself killed yet. Out the back door to Corrigan's place. Hurry! I can't hold out much longer."

Rusty Barton, bracing the wounded man with his own lean strength, backed slowly around the bar until he felt the rear door at his back. No one in the room moved, but the big-nosed bartender's hands were hovering near the edge of the bar.

Barton inched back through the door. He flashed a swift glance over the staring men, then fastened cold eyes on the barman.

"Let it be, Big-nose," he said softly. "That scatter-gun will get you a hunk of lead if you turn it loose too soon."

The door opened on a dark alley that angled off toward the canyon wall looming blackly against the sky.

A few houses sided the alley, but it was mainly a rutted trail leading off toward a low hill a quarter mile away, on which stood the dark blob of a house.

Barton broke into a stumbling run at the redhead's weak insistence. Lesh's weight was growing heavier with each step as his strength waned. The lawman grunted a word of encouragement. Lesh was a fighting man, one whose guns he might need if it came to the worst.

Halfway to Corrigan's house, the scatter-gun boomed from the direction of the saloon. Barton cursed under his breath as a flurry of leaden hornets buzzed by him. He stopped quickly, lifted the redhead into his arms, broke into a faster run. A hell of a way to open things! Start out to break up an outlaw gang, and nearly get himself killed saving one!

Up ahead, his eyes suddenly caught a dim movement in the darkness. His jaw muscles ridged. He slid to a halt.

Mark Jeeter! The thought raced through Barton's mind like flame. The killer had gone out the front door, doubled back to wait for him, was now crouching behind a boulder half a dozen yards away.

For a moment, the deputy marshal could only stare at the dull glint of metal gleaming over the top of the boulder. His lips were flat on his clenched teeth. His body, lean and hard, felt suddenly sweaty.

With Lesh still in his arms, the six-gun gripped in his right hand was practically useless. He bent forward slowly to let the redhead slip to the ground, but halted as a hard voice clipped out in the darkness.

"Hold it!"

Barton's heart leaped. It wasn't Jeeter! That voice coming in a firm, cold tone was the voice of a woman.

Just then the opening of a door in the house beyond poured a rectangle of yellow light into the darkness. A giant of a man framed himself in the doorway.

"Nan! That you?"

The glint of the gun barrel over the boulder shifted slightly.

"Dad! Come here," the woman answered. "Something's wrong."

The giant disappeared from the doorway, then reappeared an instant later holding a rifle in one hand and a glowing lantern in the other. He came forward at a lumbering run.

Barton waited in grim silence. Behind him, he could hear hoarse yells and the sound of running footsteps.

The girl screamed shortly as the big man ran up, flooding the space with yellow light.

"Dad, it's Curly! He's hurt!"

Then Barton stepped forward to meet the giant. Something told him instantly that this man with the broad, square shoulders and a mane of shaggy hair was Bull Corrigan, king of Hell Hole.

Corrigan jerked to a halt a yard away, a frown on his face.

"What happened?" he boomed. "Who shot him? Who the devil are you?"

"Someone tried to murder this carrot-top at the saloon," Barton said impatiently. "A little sawed-off gent shot him. And I'm Rusty Barton. That answers all three of your questions, and we better get inside before someone else gets hurt. There's half a dozen gun monkeys following me, and they're shooting in the dark like they don't care who they hit."

CORRIGAN'S cabin was more than a cabin—it was a miniature fortress. Huge slabs of rock leaning against the log sides of the house had caught the lawman's eye as he passed through the doorway. And well-stocked gun racks stood along each of the four walls inside the main room. But it was comfortable-looking inside. Clean curtains shuttered the windows and bearskin rugs covered the floor.

Barton laid the redhead on a cot at one end of the room, and watched silently while the girl worked over him with steady hands. Lesh wasn't hurt bad, he decided. Maybe a

shattered shoulder bone, but nothing more serious. He turned to face Bull Corrigan, who stood a couple paces behind, regarding him with an inscrutable stare.

"I'm waiting," Corrigan rumbled. "You got talk to make, Pilgrim."

Barton grinned easily. He swept the giant outlaw leader with a cool glance. Corrigan was even bigger than the rumors he had heard of him in law circles. He noted the breadth of the man's shoulders, the depth of his chest, and the two Colts that flanked thick legs. Corrigan was king of the Hell Hole and a fitting king, as he had proved when his roaring voice had sent the pursuing gunmen back to the saloon a moment before.

"Not much to tell," Barton said. "I was in the saloon when a gent by the name of Jeeter set a gun trap for this younker. Framed him into a fight over cards. This fella you call Curly Lesh got shot by a little chunky runt on the side while he was calling a bean pole by the name of Burt."

Corrigan cut in with rumbling curses. Barton waited until he became silent, then continued.

"I'm a cross between a locoed maverick and the village schoolmarm. I never could stomach seeing a man drygulched. So, like a danged fool, I butted in."

Corrigan's eyes, wide and heavy-browed, were probing Barton's lean frame.

"And what about Chunk and Burt?" he rumbled.

The lawman's eyes lowered.

"Boss, I'm plumb sorry. They sorta got killed."

"And Jeeter?"

Rusty Barton's shoulders lifted. "I don't know. He just stomped out the front door after the smoke cleared up."

Corrigan began cursing again in a deep, monotonous voice. He turned to stalk across the room, then halted, whirled, and fastened hard eyes on the lean stranger.

"You're a danged fool, all right, busting in like this on something that ain't none of your business! How'd you get by the guard, anyhow?"

Barton told him coolly, then he handed over a folded piece of paper he had taken from his shirt pocket. Corrigan unfolded the paper and glanced down, reading it swiftly. It was a reward poster. He looked up a moment later, a strange light burning in his dark eyes.

"Reckon you're telling the truth," he growled. "This picture looks just like you."

Barton chuckled. "Ought to," he said, laconically. "The sheriff had a hard enough time getting it."

Corrigan didn't see the humor. His big mouth was drawn into a thin, almost bitter, smile and he gave the stranger a cold stare.

"Murder and bank robbery, huh? You don't look the type, neither. But you'll get over that kid look. Reckon Bull Corrigan's Hell Hole gets another addition."

Barton's eyes quickened, puzzled by the strange words from the giant outlaw chieftain.

"Huh?"

Corrigan turned away.

"Nothing," he growled. "You can stay, Barton. Only keep that gun of yours leashed. It's hard enough to keep peace here without more kill-silly gunnies on the prod."

Barton nodded soberly and turned to the wounded man, who was now sitting up on the cot.

"Better, huh?" he grinned. "I didn't think that skunk took enough time when he lined up on you."

Lesh smiled faintly. "Close enough. If you hadn't butted in when you did, I reckon Burt would have corrected Chunky's mistake."

Barton shifted uncomfortably under the direct stare of the girl who was kneeling beside the redhead. She was small, built like a thoroughbred. Her golden-brown hair tumbled in soft waves to frame a firm, oval face. Her mouth, full, moist, was

smiling up at the lean stranger.

"We both owe you a lot," she said simply.

Barton's scuffed-up boot toe ruffled back the hair of the bearskin rug under his feet.

"Shucks, ma'am—" he muttered bashfully.

Outside the cabin door sounded the scrape of heavy boots. The lawman's muscles tightened a little as he saw the girl's face blanch slightly.

"Dad!" she cried. "Don't let anything happen. It's Flipper Ralls, and he's coming—"

A SHORT rap on the door sent Corrigan lumbering across the room to open it. Barton didn't turn when he heard men enter the room. His heart was drumming at the walls of his chest. The name the girl had mentioned—"Flipper" Ralls! It recalled a night three years before, when he and old Jeff Spears had raided an outlaw camp down on the Border.

There had been a gunman in that gang—a wizened, hatchet-faced killer whose lightning-fast guns were rapidly shooting his way to the leadership of the gang. Ralls had shot his way to freedom that night.

Barton's lean jaw ridged with hardened muscles as he turned slowly to face the newcomers. If he were recognized, now—

Flipper Ralls, standing just inside the door, stiffened as he saw the stranger. His hands stabbed down toward his guns without conscious thought. He caught them with an effort, peered intently through wisps of smoke that trailed upward from a cigarette sagging in his thin lips.

"Hombre, ain't I seen you before?" Ralls' mouth, a bloodless gash in his narrow face, parted in a hoarse whisper.

An icy finger traced the long length of Barton's spine, brought moisture out on the palm of his gun hand. But his face registered no change of expression, and he smiled coolly.

"Maybe," he said noncommittally. "I been around."

Ralls' muddy brown eyes were flitting over the stranger's worn clothing. They paused an instant on the battered old Colt, then swept up to meet Barton's calm stare.

"Down on the Border, maybe?"

Barton's head wagged easily. "Reckon not," he drawled. "My home range's up north, but the climate got so hot that I drifted down here for my health. Reckon I jumped right out of the frying pan into the fire. Leastways, it's been that way so far."

Corrigan's giant arms stretched out, handing the "wanted" notice to the wizened gunman.

"He got in a scrape down at Van Horn," he rumbled. "Rode in here just ahead of Sheriff Belding's posse."

Ralls glanced down at the paper, then fastened expressionless eyes on the stranger. Mark Jeeter, who had entered the room just behind the little killer, bent forward to whisper hoarsely. Ralls nodded silently.

"Jeeter here tells me you're right fast with a six-gun," he said softly.

Barton's eyes narrowed slightly, but the smile didn't fade from his lips.

"Just tolerable," he drawled. "I don't claim to be any great shakes with a six-gun. I get nervous when it goes off. Plumb lose my head, seems like."

Barton's cool reply caused Flipper Ralls' small eyes to squint into pinpoints.

"That's a bad way to be," he whispered. "You'll get killed some day forgettin' yourself like you did tonight."

Nancy Corrigan's forced laugh shattered the tenseness that had settled over the room.

"Mr. Barton will have to stay with us until he gets straightened around, Dad. He's probably tired. I'll show him to his room."

Bull Corrigan nodded expressionlessly.

"Go ahead, Barton. I'll see about your horse."

Barton followed the girl along a short hall to a side room, where she halted just outside the door.

"You'll stay here tonight," she informed him. "There's a lamp on the table near the window. I'm sure you'll be comfortable."

Barton thanked her and pushed the door open. He started to step into the room when the girl laid a hand on his arm and drew close to him.

"Please be careful," she whispered tensely. "Ralls is a killer. He won't forget what you've done tonight."

A warm smile widened Barton's mouth and he raised his voice slightly, speaking easily.

"Thanks, Miss Nancy. I'm sure I'll make out fine."

He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He waited until the sound of the girl's footsteps faded into the other room, then eased the door back open to listen to the low voices that floated down the hallway.

A little while later he closed the door again. He crossed the room, a thin blade of a smile on his lips.

He undressed and dropped on the bed, after making sure his Colt lay within easy reach. He didn't go to sleep for a while. His mind was racing with grim thoughts.

A few minutes passed and he heard the slam of the front door, the scuff of boots on hard ground. He straightened on one arm, listening to low voices that drifted in through the open window. It was Flipper Ralls, speaking in a soft voice that was no more than a droning whisper.

"He's a cool one, that jasper. Reminds me of a gun-slick lawdog I met once down on the Border. But this buzzard—"

The voice faded out of hearing and Barton sank back on the bed, dark premonition edging already taut nerves.

CHAPTER III

Bait for the Killer Pack

IT WAS sunup when Barton roused himself from sleep and got dressed. He went outside to the wash pan Nancy Corrigan had directed him to and d a s h e d stinging cold water on his face.

Bull Corrigan had already seated his giant frame at the table when he re-entered the kitchen. Curly Lesh, white-faced and with a fresh bandage over his wound, was pulling a chair under him.

"We was going to let you sleep on through," C o r r i g a n volunteered. "You snored plumb through that closed door, and we figured a little extra rest would do you good."

Barton chuckled and sat down, while the girl passed the food. Lesh talked freely during the meal, but the giant outlaw maintained a moody silence.

After breakfast, Barton followed Corrigan outdoors to see Flipper Ralls and Mark Jeeter striding up the path toward the house. They nodded coldly to Barton, drew Corrigan to one side and started talking in low tones. The lawman drifted down the trail a short distance, where the low rise of the hill gave him free view of the Hell Hole.

It was a fitting name for the outlaw stronghold, a narrow box canyon whose precipitous granite walls loomed against the red of the early-morning sky. The only entrance to the canyon was through the rock-tortured gorge at the south end. It was a narrow trail that had to be ridden slowly, a trail where one man could stand off a hundred. Barton knew this, and the tune he whistled masked the grimness of his thoughts.

The sound of men's voices brought Barton around to see the three outlaws coming toward him. Big Bull Corrigan's face was set in hard lines, but Ralls and Jeeter were grinning.

Ralls stuck out a slender hand.

"Sorry about last night, Barton," he wheezed. "Guess we both got ringy about nothing."

The lanky lawman chuckled and shifted his eyes to avoid meeting the hard light Ralls couldn't keep out of his beady stare.

"That's all right! Don't blame you at all, me being a stranger."

Barton's eyes dropped to the ground, where he kicked nervously at a scrubby patch of sage. He paused in awkward silence, then he looked up suddenly and blurted out:

"There's something on my mind, Boss," he said, eying Corrigan. "I didn't say anything about it before 'cause I wasn't sure you were with me. I thought I'd try it alone, even if it is too big for one man."

Bull Corrigan's heavy brows knit. Flipper Ralls' eyes brightened with greedy interest.

"Several ranchers down around Pecos have pooled their money together to buy a big herd of shorthorns up at Roswell. That money is leaving Pecos at sunup this morning, heading north under an armed guard."

From the corner of his eye, Barton saw Flipper Ralls stiffen, flash a hard glance at Jeeter, then return with feverish intentness on the lanky lawman.

"How'n hell did you know that?" he flashed.

Barton shrugged his shoulders coolly. "I kept my ears open while that gambler was trimming me a few days ago," he drawled.

Ralls' eye flicked narrowly to Jeeter, who exclaimed hoarsely:

"Boss, I'd swear that guard was telling the truth. He told me he'd give me the time of the shipment if I'd guarantee him his cut. He said sundown tonight, sure as shooting!"

A hellish light was dancing in the wizened gunman's muddy eyes.

"You wouldn't be planning something for yourself, would you, Jeeter?" he whispered.

Jeeter's heavy face blanched, and he gulped audibly. Barton cut in rapidly.

"You say he told you sundown?"

Jeeter nodded wordlessly. Barton grinned thinly.

"I can answer that one," he said. "The guard was telling the truth, leastwise he thought he was. That was part of the ranchers' plan, to throw off anyone who might figure on grabbing the *dinero*. They planned to rush the money through ahead of schedule, and let a posse leave at sundown to meet anybody who tried to make a stickup. Damned near worked, too."

Barton looked around at Corrigan to see the giant outlaw leader staring hard at Ralls.

"So it was a little cattle-running job you had lined up for tonight, huh?" he rumbled.

"Well, what of it? You'd have taken your cut along with the rest of us."

A dark scowl set Corrigan's heavy face in grim lines.

"You know what I said about holdups, Ralls. There's always shooting, and I won't stand for that. I run this outfit, and cattle-running is our business. Not killing!"

Hot anger flared through the wizened gunman.

"The hell you say!" He suddenly laughed harshly. "Corrigan, we've stood for your penny-ante stuff a long time. But no more. We've been sticking up stagecoaches and banks for the last year, and all you've had to do was sit in here and take your cut. You and your blasted morals! From now on, I'm takin' over!"

FOR a moment it looked to Barton's narrowed eyes as if Corrigan was going for his gun. He stood in trembling silence, glaring at the wizened killer, then abruptly he spun on his heel and stalked stiffly toward his cabin.

Ralls' eyes darted to Barton.

"You get ready," he snapped. "We're riding in an hour. Stick with

me, kid, and you'll have plenty *dinero* to lose to card sharps. But whether you're with me or Corrigan, you're riding this trip!"

Barton nodded, a thin grin on his lips.

"Okay, boss," he said.

Inside Corrigan's stone-walled house, the outlaw was storming back and forth in the big room. He looked around as Barton entered, growled under his breath and clumped out the front door.

Curly Lesh, who had been sitting at a table a short distance away, got to his feet and followed Corrigan. As he passed through the doorway, he clipped back over his shoulder:

"Reckon Corrigan is right. There are no honest outlaws any more. Just gun-fast killers. You and Ralls will hit it off plumb fine, till the time comes you don't watch your back close enough."

Barton paused in the middle of the room, a faint, bitter smile curling his lips. His hand moved up to the brim of his hat where the small gold badge was pinned under the sweatband. A killer, was he? He cursed under his breath and headed down the hallway, toward the kitchen.

Nancy Corrigan was busying herself over a hot stove when Barton entered. Her soft, round face flushed slightly and she dropped her eyes after the first reproachful stare.

"What's the matter with you folks?" Barton flared. "I thought this was a hideout for gents on the dodge. You act like I was poison."

Her eyes, misty now, fluttered up to meet his gaze.

"This *is* an outlaw hideout," she snapped. Her lips trembled slightly. "When I was just a girl, Dad was framed for a crime he didn't do. They hunted him down like a dog. Then he found this canyon, and settled down to use it for a resting place for hunted men. He thought maybe he would be helping someone who was just as innocent of crime as he was. Outlaws then made this canyon their hideout and paid Dad to let them stay. That's when people outside began to call it the Hell Hole. Killers took the place over, men who live by their guns, like Jeeter, Ralls, and—you!"

BARTON stood in stony silence after the girl ran from the kitchen. It was beginning to clear up now. Corrigan wasn't really the leader of the Hell Hole gang. It was hatchet-faced Flipper Ralls who gave the giant Corrigan his black name.

And Corrigan? Barton's eyes softened as he thought of the big, hard-faced man. Maybe it wasn't too late to correct the injustice dealt him, to do something for the golden-haired girl who had remained loyal to her father even though it meant living among Ralls' killer pack.

Waves of heat shimmered upward from the cook stove at which the girl had been working. A long step took Barton behind the range to the flue. Where there is flame, there's smoke.

He reached up to the damper, closed it with a twist of his hand. He held it closed until smoke churned up around the stove lids, then released the damper, letting the smoke pour upward through the chimney. Three times he did this, sending three separate shafts of smoke into the air.

Then he stepped back from the stove and hurried outside to the corral to saddle his horse. Grim lines pulled his mouth into a thin slit. If the posse five miles south of the canyon had seen the signal, they would be waiting. But if they hadn't seen it—

Flipper Ralls and his gun crew were in their saddles and waiting when Barton kneed his long-coupled dun down the trail to the cluster of unpainted houses which made up the town. The lawman's shifting glance told him that none of the dozen or so hard-faced men had paid any attention to the smoke signal. Probably they had been too busy

strapping on guns or checking cinch straps.

Ralls and Jeeter led off toward the end of the canyon at a fast trot. They rode well apart, and the hatchet-faced killer's waving hand told Barton that the space between had been left for him. He spurred the dun, a faint chill racing down his back. Ralls wasn't a safe man to be fooled, and if he learned that Barton had lied—

SINGLE file, they entered the narrow defile between the granite walls at the head of the canyon. At one side, on a shelf a hundred feet above the valley floor, a man stood up and watched silently as they passed. It was the guard, and Barton again mentally marked the location of the ledge.

Outside the mouth of the canyon, the trail dropped down a boulder-studded gorge. They rode without words. Barton's eyes, shielded by the drooping brim of his Stetson, darted about him.

Another three miles and the trail would cross a marshy meadow, flanked on either side by cottonwoods and fields of boulders. And there, if the lawman's signal had been seen, would be Sheriff Belding and his posse.

A swift glance back over his shoulder when they reached the meadow told Barton the gang was closely bunched just in the rear. Their pace had quickened on level ground to a gallop, and the lawman's eyes took in the sides of the meadow.

Belding was there! Barton's slitted eyes caught the slight movement of the crown of a hat over the top of a boulder.

Barton's lips flattened on his teeth. He leaned back in the saddle and sawed in on the reins. The startled dun locked its legs, slid to a bunch-footed halt as the surprised riders behind pounded by on either side.

"Here they are, Belding!"

Barton's strident yell shattered the early-morning stillness, as he whipped the dun around and spurred it across the meadow.

Twisting around in the saddle, he saw possemen jerk to their feet on either side of the meadow. A single shot blasted echoes down the valley.

"Pull up, killers!" a voice roared. "This is the law!"

Barton's gun leaped into his hand. He saw startled outlaws standing in their stirrups, their hands flashing down toward their sheathed Colts.

A rattle of shots crashed from a grove of cottonwoods. One of the gunmen clutched at his middle and slid loosely to the ground. Another screamed as a slug shattered his arm.

Barton waited, the muzzle of his battered Colt held high, as grizzled Sheriff Belding and his deputies closed in on the milling outlaws. Suddenly a horse shot out into the open, heading down the valley in a burst of frantic speed.

Ralls! Barton could make out the snarl on the man's face as he leaned over the animal's neck triggering lead at the lawmen in a deadly roll of his Colts. Barton blasted two quick shots at the killer, and missed both times.

A hot iron jabbed into the lawman's shoulder, rocking him back in the saddle. His eyes jerked away from Ralls to see Mark Jeeter, raking his horse with cruel spurs, thundering toward him. The thick-shouldered outlaw had taken advantage of Ralls' break to fight his way back to the Hell Hole. And only the lean-bodied deputy marshal stood in his way.

Barton's gun swiveled, lined on the killer's big body as a slug snicked through his hat. Another whined by his ear. Cold-eyed, Barton held his fire. Jeeter was gun-mad, staking his life on one savage dash to safety.

Then the gun in the lawman's hand bucked as the outlaw drew alongside. Jeeter reared up in his saddle, steadied himself, gave a hoarse yell. Then he slumped limply in his

saddle, swayed, and toppled lifelessly to the ground.

CHAPTER IV

"Come Back A-shooting!"

GRIZZLED Sheriff Belding strode forward with a smoking rifle in his hand. "Confound it!" he growled. "Plumb loco, that hombre. Both of us got him. You hurt bad, Barton?"

Barton shook his head.

"Just a nick," he snapped. "But Ralls got away. Get these skunks tied up, and send some men after him. I've got to open up that canyon, or you'll never get through."

Before the sheriff could reply, Barton had whirled his horse and was heading back toward the Hell Hole. As far as he knew, there were but three men left in the canyon hideout—Corrigan, Curly Lesh, and the bartender. And any one of them could stand off the posse at the rock-walled gap.

He leaned forward in the saddle, urging the dun on to greater speed. If Ralls succeeded in doubling back, the outlaws could hold the canyon until hell froze over.

He slowed his mount to a walk when he struck the stony gorge. Up ahead he could see the granite shoulders that marked the canyon's mouth. Eyes narrowed, he searched out the guard's ledge. He saw the guard lying flat behind a rocky parapet. And he was sighting down the barrel of his rifle!

Rusty Barton stiffened in the saddle.

"Hold it!" he yelped. "There's been—"

The rifle barrel jumped without warning. Barton felt something burn across his neck as he leaned frantically to one side. A slight movement, the swish of the tail of a horse ground-reined behind a boulder at the base of the cliff, brought the swift realization that the guard knew.

Barton left the saddle in a flying dive as the rifle boomed again. Someone had followed the gang down the valley, saw the ambush and warned the guard. Or Flipper Ralls had beat him back.

The lawman squirmed uncomfortably behind a low rock. A slug smashed into the rock, showering him with dust and shunted off into space, screaming.

Barton twisted to one side, triggering fast shots at the guard who had raised to a kneeling position. He saw the man lurch to his feet, clutching wildly at his face, then slide inertly off into space.

Another gun blast, and Barton dropped frantically behind the rock, cursing softly as hot lead fanned his ear. He had forgotten the man at the base of the cliff. His lips puckered grimly. Killer! Hell Hole was full of them.

Snarling savagely, he rolled free of the rock with his Colt hammering. His lead bounced off the rock the killer crouched behind, smashed with deadly accuracy at the fleeting glimpse of a startled face.

A shrill scream rent the gun echoes that reverberated between the narrow walls. Barton lurched to his feet, gun smoking, his veins suddenly chilling at that shriek.

He stumbled into a run for the boulder, a sickly pallor bleaching the range tan on his face. Then he drew up, staring aghast at the little figure crumpled behind the rock.

Barton let out a groan. For he was staring at the huddled body of Nancy Corrigan!

BULL CORRIGAN ran out of his cabin with both hands fisting six-guns when Barton rode up with the girl cradled in his arms. The giant outlaw's face paled and the guns slid nervelessly from his hands.

"Nancy! Is—is she—" His eyes rolled up to fix dumbly on Barton's

hard face. The lawman shook his head.

"Not dead," he said huskily. "But it was close. The slug raked along the side of her head, knocking her out."

Curly Lesh, with his left shoulder still tied up, ran up to take the girl from Barton's arms. He took her inside the cabin, laid her tenderly on the cot.

"Well, don't stand there gawking," he flared as the others came in. "Bring water."

Corrigan lumbered out of the room, came back an instant later with a pan of water and a cloth. Lesh's hands trembled as he daubed the wet cloth at the ugly wound at the side of the girl's head.

Bull Corrigan jerked Barton around with a heavy hand. His face was hard, lined with grim, twitching muscles that worked in deadly fury.

"Who did it?" he begged hoarsely. "Tell me, and I'll kill the dirty son with my bare hands!"

Barton's eyes dropped from the outlaw's pain-filled stare. He felt a sudden loathing for the badge that had made it his business to hunt down this grizzled giant. Then he remembered Ralls, and old Jeff Spears who lay out there under the mound of rocks, and the bleakness returned to his grey eyes.

"I did it," he said softly. "I didn't know. A sheriff's posse ambushed us on the trail. I got away. When I rode up the pass, your guard opened up. I reckon he didn't recognize me, and I had to shoot him. Then someone turned loose from the rocks at the foot of the cliff. And when the smoke cleared away—Corrigan, what was she doing there shooting at me, anyhow?"

The giant outlaw's hairy hands flashed down to empty holsters. Dark anger flooded his heavy face, and his eyes, cold with deadly fury, stabbed at the lean-framed lawman.

"So it was you! One of Ralls' gun-quick killers! Barton, you did me a good turn when you saved Curly's life. But now—"

Outside the cabin a horse thundered to a halt. Before Barton could turn, the door crashed open to show Flipper Ralls, gun in hand, standing in the doorway.

"Corrigan," he snarled, "there's the devil to pay! That cursed—"

He broke off, a murderous light brightening his muddy eyes as he saw Barton's slim body. His gun jerked up. "Well," he blazed, "this is good! I been beggin' to high heaven for this chance!"

His knuckles whitened in their grip on the butt of the gun.

"You had this comin' three years, lawdog," he gritted. "I wasn't sure before, but I am now!"

Barton's lanky body tensed as the killer came forward in quick steps. No chance to draw now. He couldn't beat this slit-eyed gunman to the trigger.

"It's your turn now—in the stomach!"

Ralls' finger jerked on the trigger, filling the room with the blast of the shot. But the slug didn't find its mark. Bull Corrigan had lunged forward, his big hand slapping down on the killer's wrist, sending the slug plowing into the floor at Barton's feet.

The gun slid from Ralls' numbed fingers and he spun on Corrigan, screaming curses.

"Corrigan, don't you know who this skunk is? He's Jeff Spears' pardner. A deputy marshal! He's the lawdog that—"

"Shut up!"

Corrigan's booming voice silenced the killer. His hand shot out and shoved Ralls, trembling in anger, back from the gun on the floor. Then he faced Barton coldly.

"That evens us up," he rumbled. "You saved Curly Lesh's life, and Nancy's in love with him. This puts us square. You slope now, pronto, while you got the chance. And if you come back, come back a-shooting!"

CHAPTER V

The Killer's Way

A HUNDRED yards down the hill from Corrigan's cabin, Barton glanced back to see the giant outlaw picking his guns from the ground. Flipper Ralls stood in the doorway, still nursing his numbed fingers.

The lawman continued until he came to an upthrust rock at the edge of the town, where he seated himself and grimly punched spent shells from his battered Colt and thumbed the chambers full again.

His eyes were hard as he looked up the low hill at Bull Corrigan's cabin, and bunched muscles worked spots of white into the lean bronzeness of his jaw.

Kill Bull Corrigan? Barton's lips flattened. And hurt that golden-haired girl who had remained loyal to her father when he had been framed for a crime he hadn't committed?

Yet he had to go back. Flipper Ralls was there—the wizened, hatchet-faced killer who was the real leader of the gang. Jeff Spears had been murdered trying to capture the slit-eyed outlaw.

Barton pushed slowly to his feet. He eased the six-gun back into its sheath, making sure it rested lightly in the well-greased leather. He stalked grimly up the slope toward the rock-walled cabin.

"Come back a-shooting!" Corrigan had said.

Barton smiled bitterly as he saw Bull Corrigan step out to meet him. He noted Flipper Ralls following with catlike steps. Ralls wouldn't interfere with Corrigan's play. But afterward— The lawman's eyes chilled.

In the doorway he could see Curly Lesh watching in rigid silence. Nancy Corrigan leaned weakly against him, her face a bleached oval under the white band of cloth bound around her head. Barton tore his eyes away from the girl to look at the hard-faced giant who had halted a dozen yards from him. Corrigan's rumble reached the lawman's ears clearly.

"I warned you, Barton."

Barton's eyes narrowed, and he nodded tensely.

"Yeah, and I came back. But Corrigan, I—"

Corrigan cursed savagely. "Then go for your gun, you yellow-livered killer! You got your crooked law backing you."

Barton's right hand stiffened just above the walnut butt of his gun. Corrigan's big hands flashed downward, swooped up, belching twin spurts of smoke.

His draw wasn't so fast. Barton could have beaten him if he hadn't paused an instant as his own gun cleared leather. He faded to one side as Corrigan fired, felt a hot iron hammer high in his left shoulder.

Barton swayed loosely on his feet, his gun, still unfired, sagging to his side. He crumpled limply to the ground as his ears rang from the scream that ripped from Nancy Corrigan's lips.

"Father!"

Barton's eyes, shaded by his hat where he lay on the ground, jerked up at the sound of the girl's voice. He saw wizened Flipper Ralls just behind the giant outlaw, hunched forward in a tight crouch, guns jutting out in slender hands.

Corrigan spun quickly in his tracks, stumbled backward as flame spouted from the killer's guns. He sank slowly to his knees. A look of pain and dark anger crept over his big face, then he flopped forward in death as the girl ran toward him, screaming.

The devil itself danced in Barton's cold eyes then. His left shoulder, twice hit by lead, throbbed fitfully, but he pushed to his feet, swaying slightly, with his frigid

attention fastened on the killer who was now menacing Curly Lesh with the smoking Colt.

A surge of hot blood churned upward in Barton's veins, splattered over his brain in flaring anger.

"Ralls! You cowardly s k u n k! Turn around here. I want to see your face when I shoot!"

Ralls spun with savage deadliness, six-gun crashing. And Rusty Barton met him with his battered old Colt blasting slugs that hammered the wizened killer into huddled death beside the man he had just murdered.

BARTON looked up into the warm eyes of Nancy Corrigan as she finished bandaging his shoulder.

"Now, listen," he said quickly. "Belding and his posse will be here any time now, and I want you to get this straight. Tell them your dad got killed trying to save me from Flipper Ralls. It isn't much, but he deserves something after the raw deal the law gave him. And he didn't shoot to kill me, just as I didn't try to get him. I know men, and he wasn't one to miss at that distance."

Nancy Corrigan nodded. Her eyes were misty, red-rimmed, and Curly Lesh stood just behind her with his good arm around her.

"I know," she said. "I regained consciousness and told him it wasn't your fault that I got hurt. I was just trying to scare you off until he could get away. Ralls was scared of you, and threatened to kill me if Dad didn't go out and face you."

Barton scowled slightly. "I figured it was something like that." Then his eyes jerked up to the redhead.

"Curly, you grab a horse and beat it. I'll stall off the posse till you double around and get through the gap. You got Nancy Corrigan to look after, and you can't do it in jail."

Curly Lesh grinned broadly. His good hand dipped into his pocket, came out with a gleaming metal badge.

"From the Cattlemen's Association," he said. "Corrigan himself sent for me when the gang began to get out of his control. He never was an outlaw, and he was through living like one. He was risking his neck to break up Ralls and his gang. Only, there wasn't much I could do."

The scowl faded from Barton's face and he glanced at the starry-eyed girl, who was looking up at the big redhead.

"Nothing you could do, huh?" he chuckled.

He turned and walked to the front door. Here he paused and spoke, almost enviously.

"From the look in that gal's eyes, I'd say you did pretty well!"

How Soccorro Got Its Name

THE prosperous Indian village of Teipana in what is now New Mexico was probably more than one hundred years old when the Spanish conquistador, Don Juan de Onate, came along in 1599. He and his people had underestimated the size of the new country and had run out of supplies. At Teipana the friendly Indians offered them corn, meats and fruits.

The Spaniards ate and rested for three days.

"How is this place called?" asked Don Jose.

"Teipana," he was told.

"Barbarous Indian name," he remarked. "We must change it to something more suitable for here we were succored. . . . Let us call it that, Succor!"

And that is its official name today, Soccorro, a name that has endured more than three and a half centuries.

—*Mark Knight*

"Don't move, hombre," Slim said. "I'm going to ask you a lot of questions"

MURDER MESA

By RAY HUMPHREYS

A cold-blooded killer learns you must know your chickens before you can hatch a successful coup!

THE door of Sheriff Charley Moore's office in Olathe flew open. A hatless, wide-eyed, panting old man bounced in, distress written all across his perspiring face. The sheriff and Slim Healey, his deputy, recognized their caller instantly. He was Todd Reynolds, one of the ancient prospectors who gophered in the hills beyond town, seeking gold always—and finding it occasionally.

"What's the matter, Todd? What's up?" cried Sheriff Moore.

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"Salinas Sam is dead—murdered—shot through the head!" gasped out Reynolds, leaning on the sheriff's desk for support. "Yes, sir, Sheriff Moore—dead as dead can be—with ugly bullet holes in him!"

Sheriff Moore and Slim came to their feet simultaneously. Salinas Sam dead? Then there could be but one logical answer. He had been cruelly murdered for his money. Everybody knew that old "Salinas" was supposed to have money—lots of it—hidden in his shack. Some said he had thousands hoarded. Others thought he had only hundreds concealed. A retired prospector, a recluse, close-mouthed, close-fisted, Salinas Sam had a shack out on Silver Mesa. Now, if he had been shot—

Sheriff Moore laid a heavy hand on Todd Reynold's shoulder.

"Todd, you're plumb sure of what you're telling us?" he asked, severely. "You aren't guessing at anything, are you? You're dead certain that old Salinas Sam has cashed in?"

Todd flung Sheriff Moore's hand off, impatiently, angrily.

"You think I'm kidding, Sheriff Moore?" he demanded, hotly. "I've cantered and trotted and galloped all the way into Olathe—on my own weary dogs—my tired feet, to be more exact—just to report this crime to you! This isn't any time for you to go asking foolish questions. I say Salinas Sam is dead!

"I went to call on him this morning and he didn't answer the door. He always keeps it locked, you know. So I went around to the window—it was open—and I looked in—and there he was—on the bed—dead—awful dead!"

It was Slim Healey who interrupted the ghastly recital. Slim—young, ambitious—famed as a go-getting deputy sheriff.

"Come on, boss," he urged hastily. "We'd better get out to Salinas Sam's place right now, pronto! I'll go fetch the horses. We can leave Todd here to rest. You wait for us, Todd. We may want to talk to you again about this later—after we get back!"

Todd was still pretty mad, it appeared. He frowned.

"You two John Laws aren't suspecting me, are you?" he demanded, sharply. "If I thought you were I'd clean up both of you."

"No," said Slim, grinning. "But we may need your help in this case. You knew Salinas well. You may be able to give us more dope. Just now the thing to do is to get out there and take a look-see."

SHERIFF MOORE, at the door, cupped his hands.

"Hey, Joe Daly!" he whooped, across the street, towards the corner of Aladdin's drug store. "You leave your wife, Missus Daly, to mind the store—she can do better'n you can, anyway—and run and get Eddie Owens and Red Feeney and Dave Brofmen and Floyd Van Wickle and some of the other fellows. Get horses, guns.

"Salinas Sam's been killed out to his shack on the mesa—and I'm taking a posse out there, lickerty-split, in three minutes. Hurry up, Joe!"

Slim grunted at that announcement. He arched his eyebrows.

"Why take a posse out there now?" he asked a bit sharply, it seemed. "We may not need one. We ought to make a careful investigation ourselves, first—without a lot of yapps walking over everything, pawing over everything, and destroying what evidence might be there."

"Careful investigation?" snorted Sheriff Charley Moore, sarcastically. "With a man dead—murdered—you want to take the time to make a careful investigation? Son, we got to get that killer—to heck with any investigation that'll delay matters.

"If you'd be more of a rough-and-tumble deputy sheriff and not so much of a doggone story-book sleuth, you and me would get along a lot better, Slim Healey."

Slim merely laughed pleasantly.

Hearing such "cracks" from Sheriff Moore was nothing new to him. He was well aware that his boss didn't approve of his constant efforts to out-think rather than to out-run the criminal. He made no reply now but bolted out the door for the corral in the rear of the building. There he saddled up two horses quickly.

He could hear the thud of hoofs in the street. Joe Daly, leaving his energetic wife to mind the drug store, had apparently gathered up a posse in a great hurry. Soon a group of grim, determined riders would be streaking it out across the mesa to avenge, if possible, the tragic passing of old Salinas Sam. Slim led the horses out of the corral.

"All right, boss!" he sang out. "Climb up and let's go!"

Poor old Salinas Sam was quite dead, just as the panting Todd Reynolds had so breathlessly reported in Olathe. There were two bullet holes in his head, one in his neck, another in his shoulder.

Salinas lay on his cot, half on his back, half on one side, with one hand beneath his head. One knee was slightly drawn up, as though, in his last moment on earth, he had started to arise to confront his assailant, only to be brutally, mercilessly cracked down again by the withering fire of the killer's weapon.

George Bostwick, the coroner, and a member of the sheriff's hastily organized posse, made a hasty, but expert, examination. Then, frowning, chewing on his cigar, he straightened up and spoke.

"Any one of those slugs was fatal," he announced slowly, grimly. "Poor old Salinas here never had a chance—not half a chance, gents! He was mowed down in his sleep, slain in cold blood, either last night or early this morning. And the killer stood about here, where I am standing right now, to judge from the angles of the bullet holes. He stood here and deliberately pumped lead into the form of a sleeping man. A heartless murderer, Sheriff Moore!"

The sheriff growled and nodded his head in agreement.

"The rat must have busted into the shack first then, for the door was locked," he said, softly. "Funny Salinas didn't hear nothing—funny he didn't hear the killer coming—"

Tim Sullivan, a guard at the Olathe jail and a member of the posse, spoke up suddenly.

"The window's open. The slayer may have climbed through there!"

"Maybe Todd Reynolds pushed up the window to get in," began Sheriff Moore, but Slim Healey, standing near the window, interrupted.

"Todd told us the window was open when he got here and he looked through it after he found the door locked," reminded Slim, stooping low over the window sill. "But still, I don't believe the killer came through this window. Take a squint here, boss, if you will."

Sheriff Moore "took a squint."

All he saw were some tobacco ashes on the wooden window sill. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I see some ashes, Slim," he said, curtly. "What of it?"

"It doesn't look to me like anyone could climb over that sill and not disturb those ashes," said Slim, his blue eyes narrowing shrewdly. He bent still lower, brushing the ashes together with a careful finger. But Sheriff Charley Moore laughed coldly.

"If the killer didn't come in—and go out—through that window and over the sill, how did he enter and leave?" he demanded, abruptly. "He couldn't have come down the chimney, like Santa Claus, unless he's the thinnest man alive—and even then he'd have landed in the stove.

"And, come to think of it, why couldn't he have dropped those ashes as he went out? Them ashes, to my way of thinking, don't mean a blessed thing, Slim. No, boys, they don't mean anything."

Coroner Bostwick, who had been busily nosing around like a bird dog searching for a telltale scent, let

out a sudden triumphant yip.

"But here is something that does mean something!" he exclaimed.

It was a note. A note written in pencil on a ragged piece of wrapping paper evidently picked up somewhere in Salinas Sam's own house.

"I found it here on Sam's trunk," explained Bostwick.

He handed it over to Sheriff Moore, who read:

Door locked. Old fool forgot open window. You try catch me.

Pablo.

There was a moment's pause after Sheriff Moore had finished reading the note. The possemen looked at one another in open amazement.

"Pablo? Pablo?" went the whispered question. "Who in all heck is Pablo, anyway?"

Sheriff Charley Moore shook his head knowingly.

"Leave it to every crook to give himself away, sooner or later," he remarked, almost gayly. "Their blamed egotism—their big mouths—get the best of the best of them. This here Pablo bird is just as good as cooked right now, eh, boys?"

The appeal to the posse and its vanity brought forth the expected response.

"You bet, Sheriff! Let's go get that hound! Look for tracks!"

THE gang poured pell-mell out of the shack, all except Sheriff Charley Moore, Slim and Coroner Bostwick. Slim was minutely examining a key he had just picked up off the floor when the sheriff interrupted with a sarcastic remark.

"Slim, if you had a magnifying glass in your hand right now you'd look just like a phony detective I saw on the stage in Denver once," he exploded, irately. "I'll tell you what this thing is that you've got in your hand—that's the key to Sam's door. And if you're looking for fingerprints on it, I'd say you were wasting your time, worthless as it is.

"That key was on the floor when I came in through the window. I picked it up, unlocked the door, and put the key back on the floor. If you see fingerprints they're mine. Further, you're forgetting the note from Pablo. He says the door was locked and he came in through the window. It's a confession."

Coroner Bostwick, though, was frowning.

He had been thinking.

"Maybe the killer used a passkey, after all," he suggested.

"Passkey to this lock?" echoed the sheriff, grimly. "He took the key, George—it and the lock were made a half century ago, I'll wager. You couldn't find a passkey to fit this lock. Look at it."

The coroner inspected the key, adjusting his glasses several times to add ceremony to the event. Slim, watching him narrowly, smiled when he handed the key back. Then Slim slipped the key into his pocket without a word.

"Slim," said Sheriff Moore peevishly, "what about this Pablo hombre? You know any Pablos that might—"

"No," said Slim briefly.

"The shack's been ransacked," remarked the coroner, "and whatever money poor Sam had is gone, no doubt. This Pablo guy—"

Sheriff Moore bit the end off a big fat cigar.

"Where would this Pablo head if he were making tracks, Slim?" he asked, anxiously. "I'd say, myself, he'd streak it for Woodland Mesa or Bear Creek or Spring Gulch. He might try for Dead Man Gulch—"

There was a distant, strange look in Slim's calculating blue eyes. He gave his boss and Coroner Bostwick a darting glance that may have meant much, may have meant nothing.

"I'd look closer around here, boss, than those places you mention," he said, quietly. Sheriff Moore slapped his thigh.

"Hiding out close, you mean, Slim? By golly, that's right." He

stepped to the door. "Hey, you fellows," he bawled to the milling possemen outside. "Pick up any tracks yet?"

"No," came the discouraging chorus.

"Listen," said the sheriff. "We'd best divide up on this job. Owens, you take a few men and search around the vicinity here. Look into the dry wash, and the caves over on Spruce Creek. This Pablo may be under cover, waiting for a better chance to sneak out.

"And you, Brofman, take some of the boys and ride for Bear Creek. Search it from top to bottom. I want about four men left to go with me to Woodland Mesa. We have to locate this Pablo hombre, boys!"

"You bet, Sheriff!"

"We won't kiss him when we do find him either, Sheriff!"

"That's the spirit, men!" boomed Sheriff Moore. He knew his posse. He knew that if this Pablo killer were anywhere around, the posse would find him. "Well, boys, get started. The men who are going with me wait just a minute or two. I'll be right with you." He turned back.

"Bostwick, you'll stay here until your wagon gets out from town. And you, Slim?"

"There's a squatter living half a mile from here, a health-seeker, with a little chicken ranch, I hear," replied Slim. "I sort of aimed to go see him."

"What would he know about this?"

"That's what I mean to ask," said Slim, quietly. "He may have seen somebody, something."

"Bah!" exclaimed Sheriff Moore, and he strode out.

"Sheriff Moore is rough and ready," grinned Slim, to the coroner. "He's sore because I'm more quiet and cautious. What do you think is the best method, George, if you don't mind answering?"

But Coroner Bostwick made a gesture of despair.

"I'm not saying," he answered. "I got troubles of my own. . . ."

JOGGING up on his flashy pinto, Slim lazily saluted the tall man standing in front of the crude, unpainted shack. It was the first time Slim had seen the chicken rancher. He found him keen-eyed, bronzed, alert; not just what he had expected him to be.

"Howdy," drawled Slim, with a cordial smile. "I'm sure sorry to be bothering you, brother, but there's been a little ruckus over to a neighbor's and I thought I'd—"

"Know all about it," said the rancher, none too friendly.

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, Sheriff Moore just stopped here a few minutes ago and asked me a lot of fool questions about a man named Pablo," said the man, coldly. "I told him I'm a newcomer here—for my health—and I don't know anybody. I didn't know the old gink that was killed, either!"

Slim grinned. So Sheriff Moore had stopped, after all. Evidently Moore was sufficiently interested in Slim's remark to come over and look at the strange chicken rancher, anyway. Well, that was encouraging. But the sheriff hadn't had any luck, apparently.

"So you didn't see any stranger—any Mexican?" asked Slim, dropping casually off his horse. He lit a cigarette with great indifference. The stranger scowled at Slim's easy doings.

"I got business, Mister," said the man. "I can't chin—"

"My name is Slim Healey, deputy sheriff," explained Slim. "I don't want to appear to be a blamed nuisance, but—"

"Well, I answered the sheriff's questions and I don't know any more answers," shot back the man, still frowning.

Slim laughed. The fellow was certainly hard to get acquainted with, it seemed. He tried another line.

"You got some nice chickens," Slim remarked, looking across to

the wire pen where some hundred or so young chickens were confined. "What are you going to do with them, partner, sell them for broilers when they get big enough?"

"I'm raising them," said the man. "I'm going to sell eggs this fall."

"Had any experience in the chicken line?" asked Slim.

"A lot—back East," answered the man reluctantly. It was plain that he wasn't relishing Slim's company even a little bit.

"What kind of chickens are they—Leghorns?" asked Slim.

"No, Wyandottes," said the man, a trifle peevishly. "You know anything about chickens yourself?"

"Only that they're good to eat," said Slim, smiling. He dropped his cigarette, ground it into the earth with his boot. Then, a second later, he fumbled through all his pockets unsuccessfully.

"I guess I'm all out of smokes," he remarked. "Could I bum one off you, brother—if you don't mind?"

The rancher brought out a package with a sour grunt.

"So," said Slim, taking one and lighting it with a flourish. "You're going to sell eggs? How many eggs do you expect to get a day from a nice looking batch of chickens like these?"

The man was looking at Slim through narrowed eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe enough to keep me supplied and give me enough over to sell and live on."

"These chickens will lay in a few months, eh?"

"Sure, why not?" countered the rancher.

"Nothing," said Slim. "I'm just making talk while I smoke. I'll finish this cigarette and move on, I guess." He puffed hard. Then he lazed around on the far side of his horse, pretending to inspect the saddle rigging there. He was back in a minute, grinning.

"Living out here all alone," he said to the stranger, "and with a murder so close to you, maybe you'd like to buy a good gun. I've got several for sale cheap now, if you're interested."

"I got a gun," grunted the rancher.

"Well, I'd sell this one here awfully cheap," said Slim, slowly, and he dragged his six-gun from the holster with elaborate deliberation. With the gun once out in his hand, however, Slim's manner changed like lightning.

"Don't move, hombre, while you're looking at this gun. I've got you covered! I'm going to ask you a lot of questions now and some, I'll bet, you won't dare to answer."

The startled chicken rancher dropped one hand an inch or so.

"Stick 'em up!" cried Slim. "I may be making a blunder but I'm not making the mistake of letting you get to a gun. Up—up!"

The man's hands went up, as ordered. His eyes narrowed to mere ominous slits. Edging closer, Slim took a small gun from him.

"You've got a larger gun, brother?"

"What if I have?"

"We'll go in the house," said Slim, quietly.

The house was a mere shell: one room, with a few sticks of furniture and a trunk. Slim scanned it hastily, eagerly.

"Was Sheriff Moore in here?"

"He was. He's a gentleman."

Slim grinned good-naturedly. He ignored the slur.

"Meaning I'm something else again," he laughed. "Well, I'm curious. I thought that you were supposed to be a sick man, hombre."

"I am. I'm here for my health."

"But I don't see a single medicine bottle, a single pill box," smiled Slim. "Funny you wouldn't have at least one. And you don't look very sick to me, either. You look plenty husky, plenty tough, if I may say so, brother. Sit down in that chair."

The chicken rancher sat down with a grunt. There was nothing else for him to do, seeing he was under the menacing muzzle of Slim's gun. Slim, his blue eyes fixed steadily on

the prisoner, knew that he was in a rather ticklish position. If the circumstantial evidence against this man didn't hold up—

"When," asked Slim, suddenly, "were you last over to Salinas Sam's shack?"

THE man in the chair never moved a muscle. His cold, defiant eyes met Slim's gaze unflinchingly.

"I was never over there," he answered firmly.

"Oh, yes, you were," said Slim, with a grim smile that seemed to hold the other man entranced momentarily. "And you left your calling card on the window sill. Some cigarette ashes—peculiar, light, flaky ashes—the same sort of ashes I just got off the cigarette you gave me.

"I asked you for that cigarette for purposes of comparison, and it's a rare brand around these parts. Imported, isn't it?"

The man in the chair simply glared for a minute.

"You go jump in the lake," he said, finally, bearing his teeth.

"That," said Slim with a shrug, "is all I want to know. I'd expect such an answer from a guilty man. You're guilty as heck, Mr. Chicken Rancher! If you don't mind too much, I'm taking that length of rope yonder and tying you up before I start looking around this dump. Where did you hide that loot you took from Salinas Sam's?"

An oath from the man in the chair was the only response. But Slim merely shrugged his broad shoulders. He was sure of his ground now.

He took the rope and, keeping the man covered, he advanced on him, maneuvered around behind him, and eventually had him well anchored, with the rope, to the chair.

All the time he was working the rancher kept up a steady barrage of oaths. But they didn't affect Slim.

"Now," he said, as he finished the job and holstered his gun, "I'll find that loot—unless you want to be nice about it and tell me where you hid it. You can be accommodating, you know!"

"Go jump—" began the irate stranger.

"No, you jump!" advised Slim, and he turned away. He dragged the trunk from the wall and went through it systematically. He found no money, but he did find newspaper clippings. They all told of the escapades of one Williams and one of the clippings included a picture. It was the likeness of the man in the chair.

"So your name is Williams," mused Slim, laughing. "And you've been in a good many brushes with the law. Ever up for murder before?"

The man didn't answer. Slim continued his search. But as time passed and he found nothing, he began to worry again. What if the fellow had hidden the stuff out in the desert somewhere, under some bush? It might be impossible ever to find—

Slim plucked a coffee can off the shelf and slipped off the lid. But even before he had the lid off, he knew he had the loot.

"Well," he said, glancing into the can, "some silver, much gold, but mostly greenbacks. You made a nice haul—Pablo."

"That's my own money, smartie!" said Williams tersely.

"No doubt," said Slim, "but this little golden horse watch charm, with the tiny emerald eyes—I'd know that anywhere. I've seen it dangling on Salinas Sam's vest so often. And this old British sovereign here—I know that was Sam's lucky piece for half a century or so. And what have you got to say to that, Williams?"

This time Williams squinted. That was all. But Slim noticed that all the bravado was gone, and the man's face was chalky, his hands shaking, his eyes furtive. Yes, the murderer of poor Sam was caught.

"It takes an awful smart man to get away with murder in Colorado,"

remarked Slim, quietly. "There is about only one safe way of doing it. Do it and ride like Hades. If you have a faster horse than the law, you may get away."

There was a commotion at the door of the shack. Slim swung around to find Sheriff Moore and several of the posse there. They were hot, dusty. The sheriff gave Slim an angry look.

"Saw your pinto outside and stopped," he said. "You still here chin-chattering, while the rest of us have been wearing ourselves out?"

"Maybe," smiled Slim, nodding toward the man in the chair, "but I've got my man. Gents, meet Mr. Williams—alias Pablo—the killer!"

"What?" exclaimed Sheriff Moore, starting as he noticed the ropes on the chicken rancher. "You mean that this man—"

"Exactly," said Slim, softly. "There's the .38 on the shelf there, that did the job. I've got poor Sam's money, watch charm, lucky piece. I've got proof who this bird is, too. He's a crook with a long record. He's no health seeker and no chicken rancher. He squatted out here with an evil eye on old Sam, waiting his chance; and when it came he took it. But he left telltale tracks."

"Tracks in the sand, Slim?" asked the amazed sheriff.

"No, just sort of mental tracks I followed," said Slim. "You see, I was convinced no murderer, however crazy, would leave a note telling how he got in and signing his name. So I decided that it was a blind. I figured there was no Pablo whatever and that the killer didn't come through the window.

"So I looked over the door. I found the key and on that key a substance that I examined and tasted and discovered to be traces of soap. Therefore some visitor had taken a soap impression of Sam's key and made a duplicate. Easy so far. And now, who could be the killer?"

SLIM paused and smiled broadly at the man in the chair.

"When I heard that there was a strange chicken rancher only a short distance away I decided to look at him," went on Slim. "I gathered up the ashes from the window sill in Sam's place—and that was another thing. I couldn't see a man coming in and going out of Sam's shack over that sill and not disturbing those ashes.

"When I saw this gent here I noticed that he wasn't very sick-looking. I borrowed a smoke from him. The ashes were the same as those on Sam's window sill and the cigarette was imported—rare around here—so I figured I sure had the right man. After that I found the loot."

Sheriff Moore nodded his head slowly in agreement.

"Well, Slim, I guess you win, after all," he admitted, a bit ruefully. "But you had a lucky break, after all. You took a big chance."

Slim smiled broader.

"You came down before I did and looked this man over, boss," he reminded the sheriff. "But I guess you didn't see what I saw."

"What was that?"

"This," laughed Slim. "All the young chickens he's got in the pens are cockerels—young roosters. But he told me that he was an experienced chicken rancher and was keeping the chickens to lay eggs this fall. He just got a shipment of any kind of chickens in from a hatchery to help in his scheme against poor Sam. I knew, when he told me about the eggs, that he was no chicken fancier but only a poor liar. It was really the roosters that told on him, after all."

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KILLER SIGN

CHAPTER I

The Last Warning!

THIS is the last straw, Paul," said Gus Wheaton angrily. "I'm givin' you fair warnin' I won't be responsible for what happens if them two young hellions ever come onto my ranch again."

"I know, Gus. I know how you feel." Paul Kendrick frowned. "I reckon it does get pretty tiresome, the way two young fools are eternally playin' cockeyed practical jokes on everybody in the valley. But they're only kids, Gus. Only twenty. Shucks, Gus—you and I was twenty once."

"Yeah?" Wheaton snorted. "Well, we didn't go around pesterin' the lives out of everybody like that. I'm tellin' you, Paul, I've had enough of it. If you don't do somethin' about them two, I will!"

"All right, all right," Kendrick replied hastily. "I'll do what I can, Gus. I've warned 'em a dozen times that their foolishness will get 'em in trouble, but they don't pay me no heed."

"Then *make* 'em listen!" snapped Wheaton. "Just imagine what might have happened if Higbee'd been off his horse for any reason. He wouldn't have had a chance. Of all the darn fool things—scarin' the wits outa the Chinese cook, so that he went tearin' down right by the herd, yellin' and ki-yi-in', and stampedin'

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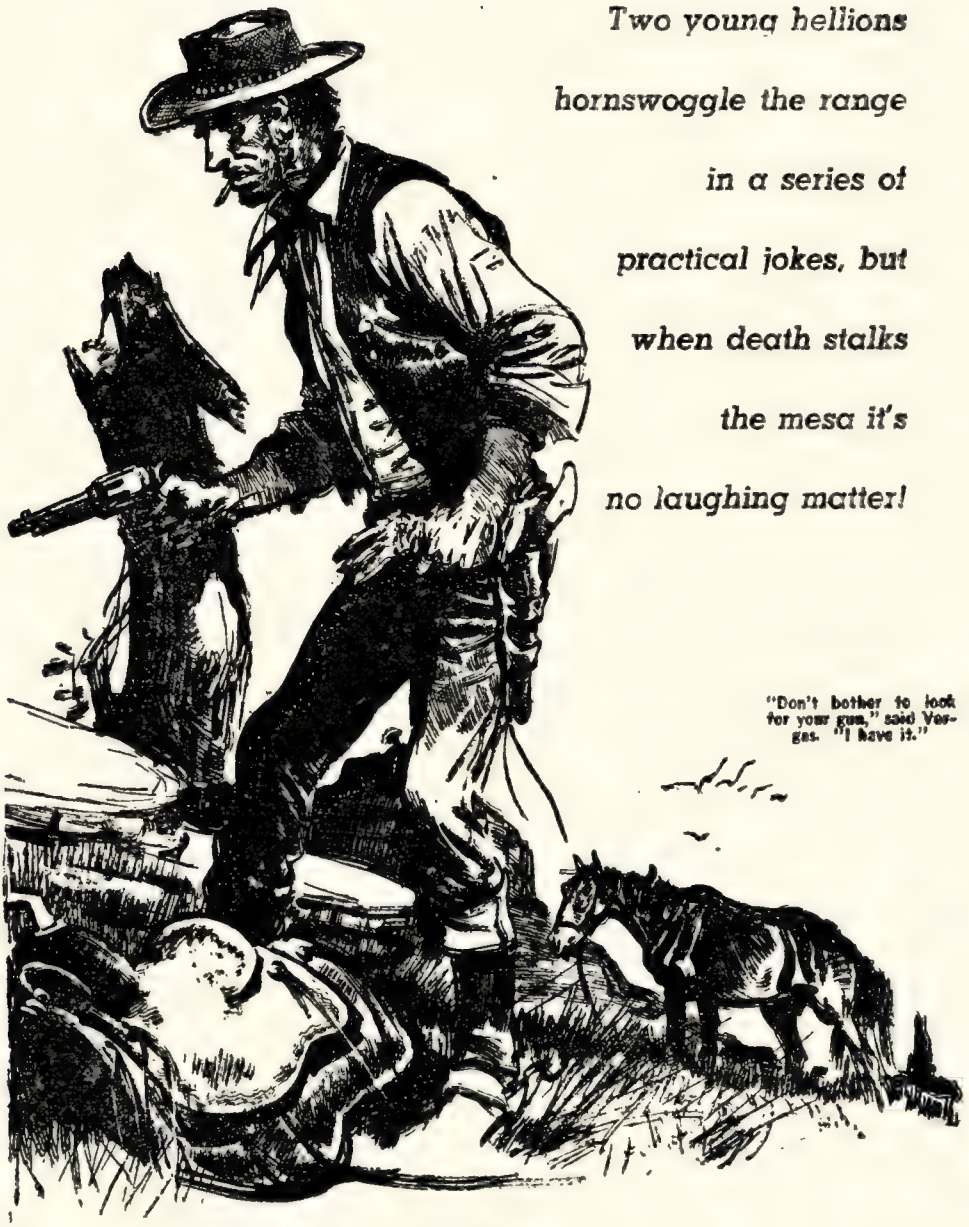
DON ALVISO

Two young hellions hornswoggle the range in a series of practical jokes, but when death stalks the mesa it's no laughing matter!



"Don't bother to look for your gun," said Vargas. "I have it."

the cattle all over hell's half acre.

"Joel and Dal was both afoot right at the time themselves. What if the stampede had turned their way? I know them two kids ain't got no sense, but ain't they got no fear, neither?"

Paul Kendrick sighed. "I reckon not, Gus; that's what makes it all the worse. They ain't even afraid o' Vargas. They wanted to go huntin' up in the Kallina Hills, right after Vargas had been down here and raised hell again. I cussed 'em out and told 'em to stay away from there, unless they wanted to be brought home feet first, and the next thing I knew they was gone somewheres. And their rifles was gone, and their campin' kits. I'd bet anything that they—"

Wheaton drew a sharp breath of anger and dismay.

"The crazy fools! They've gone back up there where some thinks Vargas hangs out. They'll never come back, Paul!"

"Oh, yeah, they'll come back," Kendrick said wearily, rising, as Wheaton rose also and turned toward the door. "With a deer, probably. They're good boys, Gus. But that's exactly what drives 'em to do these crazy things; they just naturally ain't got any fear. They don't mean no harm, but that ain't any excuse. I've told 'em that somebody's goin' to git hurt, or killed, if they don't cut it out. I'll talk to 'em again tonight, and I'll tell 'em plenty."

"You'd better!" Wheaton replied, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. "I didn't say much the time they practised ropin' on my two red bulls and like to peeled the hide off both of 'em, but—enough's enough!"

Kendrick followed Wheaton out onto the porch, repeating his promise to administer a stern reprimand to his son Joel and Joel's saddlemate, Dallas Markham. Gus Wheaton got onto his horse and rode away, and Kendrick went back into the house. In the living room, he sank wearily into the big easy chair where he spent most of his leisure hours. He was, he told himself, getting old. Joel was a big strapping fellow. He wished the kid would quit his foolishness, settle down, take the reins and get accustomed to running the ranch.

"To date, he ain't showed much promise," Kendrick muttered to himself.

He retracted the words even as he said them, with the thought that maybe he was being a bit too hard on the boy. Joel was a good worker, good-natured, and got along well with everybody. He drank only moderately, and all the gambling he did was with his chum Dallas. And Dallas was one of the best hands on the Circle K.

IF ONLY the two would not play at their favorite sport of working practical jokes on all the rest of the ranches anywhere and any time, just because opportunity presented itself and the mood struck them!

He had told Gus the truth; they were good boys. He was willing to bet that they would come back from their hunt early enough to go out and mend that fence.

He was right; the boys had already returned and were on their way to the section of south line fence he had told them to repair. They didn't mind.

The regular cowhands hated to dig post holes and string barbed wire, and somebody had to do it.

Joel and Dallas went cheerfully at it, finished the job of fence repairing and came in at evening, to find Paul Kendrick waiting for them grimly in the living room. The two cowboys entered the room to face him, hats in hand, looking sheepishly guilty.

"Gandy said you wanted to see us right away, soon as we got in," Joel said, his eyes on the floor.

Kendrick cleared his throat. "Yeah. And I can see that you know what I wanta talk to you about."

"If it's about the herd over on Gus Wheaton's range," Joel began, "we —we didn't—"

"That's exactly what it's about," Kendrick cut in. "And Gus is plenty mad. Why can't you two wildcats behave yourselves?"

"We—we didn't mean nothin'," Dallas protested.

Kendrick frowned angrily. "Seems to me I've heard that before! How long you think this range is goin' to stand your tomfoolery? You want to get somebody killed?"

Dallas bit his lip and drew himself up.

"I suppose we shouldn't have done it, boss, but how did we know Higbee was jest over the ridge with the beef herd? And how could we know the cattle were so blamed spooky? I'm sorry for the delay and extra expense it caused Gus. Pretty costly joke just to scare hell out of a Chinese. I'm sure sorry."

Kendrick sighed and spread his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"Well, I hate to have to say it, Dal, but you two have forced me to it. When you was just kids, the ranchers kind of overlooked things, but you're men now, and this fool business has got to stop. If it don't and if there's any more trouble about you two, I've gotta let you go, Dal!

"You been here with me a long time. I think almost as much of you as I do of Joel. But if you two bein' together is such a temptation to raise hell all the time, why, next fuss you git into you kin call for your time."

Dallas straightened, paling, and looked Kendrick steadily in the eye.

"Yes, sir. We'll cut it out. I reckon we both got scared out today, anyway. We went huntin', after you told us not to, and we—we saw Vargas."

Kendrick started. "You saw Vargas!"

"Yes, sir. And we got outa there. We've had enough. Come on, Joel."

"Wait!" said Kendrick sharply. "Don't you realize how important that is? That proves that he *is* hidin' out in the Kallina Hills! If I get the sheriff and a posse up here before I go east with the beef stuff, can you direct 'em to the place where you saw him?"

"Ye-yes, sir," stammered Dallas. "But that's only sendin' more men to be killed and—"

"Don't argue!" Kendrick interrupted. "Somebody's got to get him. Go on, get out now. I've got things to do."

CHAPTER II

Kid Gloves Vargas

THE two accepted his ultimatum in silence, and went out to the bunkhouse, where they drew aside in a corner to themselves.

"I reckon we better had cut it out!" Dallas said in an undertone.

Joel just nodded. "Yeah. It'd be awful to have you sent off the Circle K, and Dad sure wasn't foolin'."

Dallas drew a long breath. "Oh, well, soon as old Gus gets that herd together again, they'll load the train and forget it. And in a coupla weeks your dad'll be back from shippin' the cattle, and we'll have a roarin' time at the party. Gus ain't such a bad old jasper, even if he is a grouch. He took Dolores Lazaro in when she was only a little bit of a kid, and brought her up, just like your dad took me in. He couldn't be too mean, to do that. I bet we'll have a swell party, Joel."

Joel nodded. "Yeah. I'd darned near forgot the party. This range is turnin' out a lot of beef this year, and the blowout will be bigger and better than ever."

Dallas averted his gaze. "You bringin' Alma?"

"Alma Wheaton?" Joel frowned and shrugged. "I don't know, Dal. I don't suppose, after all the fuss about us scarin' that herd, old Gus'll even want me on the ranch, let alone, allow me to bring his daughter to the shindig."

"Sure it's on account of that?" Dallas probed. "Sure it ain't on account of Dolores bein' on the same ranch?"

Joel's frown darkened to a scowl. "Dolores was there last year, and the year before that."

"Yeah, but Alma's four years older, and Dolores is grown up this year. I ain't blind, Joel. And I reckon that's somethin' else we might as well settle right now."

"Mebbe I can do some settlin' myself," Joel interrupted. "You've been mighty white, Dal, takin' my sister Julie places because you knew she liked you and there wasn't anybody else to take her but middle-aged, broken-down cowhands. But I ain't blind either. I know the way you've been feelin' about Dolores lately. Julie will get by, and she wouldn't want you to hang around with her that way if she knew how much you thought of Dolores."

Dallas stared out the bunkhouse window. "Listen, Joel. I'm just a cowhand. Probably never will be anythin' else. You've been takin' Alma Wheaton places and stayin' away from Dolores because you knew I liked her. Well, I'll tell you somethin'. I wouldn't marry Dolores Lazaro if she asked me to. She deserves better than I can ever give her. She deserves somebody like you.

"I want you to know I'd like to see it that way, the two people I think most of—together. It—it just seems sort of right, that's all. I wanted to tell you, so in case anythin' ever happened to me—you'd know how I felt, and—"

"If anythin' happened?" Joel interrupted uneasily. "You worryin' about Dad sendin' you away?"

"No—not exactly. But, there's other things. There's Vargas."

Joel started, and his scowl grew black.

"Vargas! You ain't serious about goin' after him, are you?"

"Mebbe I am," answered Dallas evenly. "Like we're all sayin'—somebody's gotta get him. And—there's five thousand dollars reward on him, dead or alive. A feller could git a pretty nice start on five thousand dollars, Joel."

"A start—for Dolores," said Joel roughly. "If you could do that, you'd deserve to have her. And you was the guy who was never goin' to be anythin' but a cowhand! But you're not goin' to do it, see? You'd never come back alive. Haven't you heard enough about that jasper? Have you forgot that my uncle, Wade Kendrick, went out to try to get Vargas when he first showed up in Kallina Valley?"

Dallas shuddered. He hadn't forgotten; nor had he forgotten how Vargas had dumped Wade's dead body on the porch of the ranchhouse at midnight a week later.

Joel saw his advantage and pressed it.

"And there was Bill Norman, the toughest and nerviest sheriff the valley ever had. He was goin' to show Vargas. He was goin' to put an end to Vargas' robbin' and killin'—and you and me both saw his black gelding come back down the valley, its reins lashed so tight to the saddle horn that the bit was cuttin' its mouth, and poor Bill riddled with bullets and tied in the saddle. And that was only a year ago.

"You goin' after Vargas! You forgit it, you poor fool, or Dad won't have to shove you off the ranch—Vargas'll do it for him."

"Oh, well, I reckon we're both doin' a lot of crazy talkin'," Dallas replied. "Sheriff Houston is no slouch. Mebbe he'll get him."

BUT Roy Houston didn't. While Wheaton's men were rounding up the herd that Joel and Dallas had stampeded, Kendrick sent for Houston, and Houston picked up a grim and businesslike posse of twelve and came. Wheaton's men drove the herd to the loading corrals at Tobin, where there were already waiting several thousand head from the Circle K, and the Box T

and the Bar I. The cattle were herded into the string of box cars on the siding; the next freight picked up the cars, and rolled them east toward Chicago, with Paul Kendrick on board in charge.

So Paul Kendrick didn't know the result of the trip Sheriff Roy Houston had made, at the direction of Joel and Dallas, to that valley from which they had seen Kid Gloves Vargas ride down a ridge. The posse had returned; and out of that posse only seven men came back alive, carrying their dead—and one of the dead men was Roy Houston.

The valley was more stricken and fear-ridden than ever after the posse had come in, the dead had been buried, and the remaining seven men had returned, hopeless and despairing, to their own home territory.

Joel and Dallas sat in the bunkhouse with the men, and heard the low-voiced conversation, and tried to turn the subject to lighter thoughts. They brought up the subject of the big party to be held within another week, and the men listened, and tried to forget Vargas. Joel and Dallas went outside, and Joel decided to saddle up and ride over to see Dolores.

He bade Dallas a cheerful goodby and a little while later rode up to the ranch buildings of the Wheaton ranch, the Cross Bar W. Dismounting from his horse, he joined the cowboys lounging on the bunkhouse porch. Blazer, the Box T foreman, was there visiting, and as Joel approached, he picked up an old branding iron someone had carelessly left lying around. He brandished the iron, and the Wheaton men began to laugh.

"What's so very funny?" Joel demanded.

"Your reputation precedes you, boy," Blazer answered solemnly. "Whenever we see you or Dal Markham comin', we just naturally get ready to defend ourselves."

Joel grinned, and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Oh, forget it, can't you?" he said. "People around here got no sense of humor. Besides, Dal and me swore off. From now on we're goin' to grow long beards and spend our time layin' around and tellin' about the excitin' things we done in our youth."

"I'll believe that when I see the beards," Blazer scoffed, a mocking grimace on his gaunt face. "How 'bout a little game of penny ante, Joel?"

Joel shook his head. "No, thanks. I don't feel in the mood for playin' cards."

One of the Wheaton men snickered. "You ain't got no imagination, Blazer. Now, I ask you, with a big round moon just drippin' romance, why would Joel come over to the Cross Bar W?"

"Couldn't possibly be to see us," one of the other boys put it.

"Nor the Chinee cook, d'you think?"

"If any of you guys was a friend of mine," Joel flared, "you'd send the cook in to tell Dolores that I'd like to see her."

"Go in and tell her yourself," Higbee leered. "Go ahead! Gus Wheaton's got a club hangin' right by the back door, savin' it for you! He's just waitin' to let you have it the first time you dare set foot on his porch."

Joel scowled at them again, collectively, turned and walked gingerly toward the ranchhouse. Thirty feet from the screened porch he halted, and leaned against a locust tree in the back yard. One of the laughing Cross Bar W men called after him:

"Jest wait there a minute and I'll tell the boss you're here."

"You do, and I'll put snakes in your bunk!" Joel threatened.

Dolores, through the open kitchen window, heard his voice, and came hastily out onto the porch.

"Why, Joel! I didn't know you were here," she said. "Just a minute. I'll be right out."

HE WAITED patiently till she joined him under the locust tree.

"Could I—would you let me take you to our party?" he asked bluntly the moment she came up to him.

"I—I thought you'd be taking Alma." Her dark eyes tried to see his face in the moon shadows under the tree.

"I won't be," he said. "Whether you come or not, I won't be bringin' Alma."

"Well, then—I—I'd like to go with you, Joel."

"That's swell!" Joel straightened from his lounging pose against the tree. "I'll ride over early in the evenin'. We got word from Dad. He'll be back just a week from tonight. Ma says as long as most of the ranchers will be over to the Circle K the night Dad gets home, anyway, she'll just have the party that night. Awful about Sheriff Houston and the boys, ain't it?"

"Terrible!" Dolores caught her breath. "Oh, Joel! If somebody could only get that man before he does any more killing! What are we going to do, Joel?"

"I don't know," answered Joel soberly. "Let's don't think about him. Let's think about the party, and Dad gettin' home, and all the fun we're goin' to have that night. I hope Dad gets a good price for the stuff."

Kendrick did. He got the highest price the Kallina Valley beef had ever brought, and he reached home a week later jubilant over the fact. He had taken the biggest herd ever shipped from Kallina Valley, and he was proud of the sale he had made. He felt a surge of relief when he set foot in his own house, secure in the knowledge that now nothing could happen to the money he was carrying for the other ranchers before he could deliver it to them.

He had no thought and no fear of Kid Gloves Vargas. Vargas never struck twice in such quick succession.

Around four o'clock in the afternoon Gus Wheaton came in from the Cross Bar W, and half an hour later Pop Turner arrived from the Box T. By evening most of the men and women of the Kallina range were there. The big ranchhouse was crowded with jovial men and busy women, resolved to forget all their troubles for the time being and enjoy themselves. This was the big annual party of the range, and they weren't going to let Vargas or anybody else spoil it.

Kendrick, on the front porch, talking to Wheaton and Turner, glanced at the signs of festivity.

"Looks like a big night, don't it, boys?" he laughed. "Soon as Sweeney and Mullen get here, we'll haul out the tally sheet and divide 'er up. You boys are goin' to be surprised at how good you all done this year."

"Well, I can sure use it!" said Wheaton.

"Me, too," agreed Turner. "There's been some pretty slim years I'd like to forget, Paul."

"I hope them two young hellions don't go pullin' nothin' tonight" said Wheaton. "All this party goin' on, it's goin' to be an awful temptation."

"Don't worry," Kendrick replied grimly, "they won't. They're through with their fool nonsense. They got it scared out of 'em plenty."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, out in the barn somewhere."

CHAPTER III

Tragic Jest

KENDRICK erred. The boys were in the blacksmith shop beyond the barn. Dallas was arguing anxiously with Joel.

"You ain't goin' to do it!" Dallas was saying. "You promised."

"Oh, shucks, don't be a sap!" Joel grinned wickedly. "It's too good a chance to miss, Dal. This won't be

like pullin' anythin' on the other ranchers, you big bum. Right here at home is different. Dad'll think it's a swell joke himself."

"You're not goin' to do it!" said Dallas angrily. "What if somethin' should go wrong?"

"Go wrong?" Joel stared. "What could go wrong, chump? I'm not goin' to do nothin' but make 'em think I'm holdin' 'em up and stealin' the ice cream and cake. What's the harm in that? As soon as they think their ice cream and cake is gone for good, we'll lug it right back again. Chances are there won't be anybody around that back room anyway, except mebbe one or two of the women folks.

"What if they do get a little scared? They'll get over it the minute they see it's only me. That's where the fun comes in."

Dallas continued to argue, in vain, as Joel began putting on the things he had surreptitiously got together from one place and another; his own gray trousers from his bedroom, Gandy's blue flannel shirt from the bunkhouse, Peel's big cream-colored Stetson from the same place, and his father's light tan kid gloves from the saddle room.

Dallas shivered as Joel added the master stroke, a red bandanna that quite hid his face.

"Golly, don't, Joel! You look jest like him—the way he looked that day on the ridge. They—they'll think it's Vargas, shore, and the men'll come pilin' after you the minute the women start yellin'."

Joel chuckled. "Well, then, they'll see it's only me and the joke'll be on them. Boy, this is goin' to be good."

Dallas followed him out of the blacksmith shop, still arguing, and dogged his footsteps as Joel slipped toward the house under cover of the evening shadows and the trees. Neither of them from the blacksmith shop, could see the five ranchers gathered on the front porch, could hear Paul Kendrick say to Sweeney and Mullen who had just arrived:

"Well, now you're here, we'll get this money divided up. We'll go into that back room off the kitchen. Lucy's got the ice cream and cake cached away in there, and she's not allowin' anybody to go near it. That's the one place we can be sure of not bein' disturbed. Come on, boys."

As Joel and Dallas neared the house, they could not see, through the drawn blind, the five ranchers entering the room and gathering around the old kitchen table placed there. The ranchers had entered from the house, through the kitchen. They couldn't see Lucy Kendrick turn from her work beyond the kitchen sink with a surprised glance as the men passed through, nor hear Kendrick say to her in apology:

"We won't bother a thing, Lucy. Me'n the boys are just goin' in here where we won't be bothered, to settle up on their share of the beef money."

The door opening from the small back room onto the porch was closed as Joel came up the steps, with the importuning Dallas at his elbow. Joel guessed that one or two of the women must be in there fussing with the cakes, all right, because he heard a slight sound of movement in the small room. He winked at Dallas, shoved Dallas back out of the way, and kicked open the door, growling in his throat: "Stick 'em up!"

He stepped to the doorway, froze in his tracks at what he saw: five men sitting around the table, and heaped between them over eighteen thousand dollars in twenty, fifty and hundred-dollar bills. He saw the ranchers whiten, as their eyes leaped to his figure standing there facing them with drawn guns. He heard Sweeney cry: "Vargas!" He saw Gus Wheaton leap to his feet.

He tried to shout a warning, too late. The blast of Wheaton's gun blended with Sweeney's cry.

JOEL swayed, reached out blindly with one hand and

crumpled to the floor. Dallas leaped into the doorway with a wild yell.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot no more! It's Joel!" He threw himself down beside Joel's body. "Joel! Joel! You ain't bad hurt, are you? Joel!"

The five ranchers stared like men stunned, and Gus Wheaton wilted into his chair, his gun hanging from his nerveless hand. He hid his face with the other hand, as Kendrick tried to cry out, and choked, and stumbled toward the body.

Dallas jerked the bandanna from Joel's face. Kendrick swayed and literally fell to his knees as he saw Joel's glazing eyes.

Joel's lips moved, stiffly:

"Not your fault—Dal. Just—goin' to—swipe the ice cream—Dad, just —joke. Didn't know—you—here—" He gasped jerkily, and lay still.

Lucy Kendrick came rushing in from the kitchen with her daughter. She halted with a scream of horror, threw up her hands, and fainted on the floor beside Joel's dead body. Julie sank to her knees, threw her arms around her brother.

Kendrick looked up wildly, like a man lost—and through his shock and blind grief he saw another figure loom in the doorway, another figure in gray trousers, blue flannel shirt, cream-colored Stetson and light tan kid gloves. Each gloved hand held a level, menacing gun. A sharp cold voice crackled into the stark silence:

"Up with 'em, all of you. *This* is no joke!"

The eyes of the men in the room went from the still body on the floor to the figure in the doorway. That face was masked behind a red bandanna, too. But they knew it was Vargas; Vargas, who had heard of the money coming in with Paul Kendrick, and had determined to get it, in spite of the legend that he never struck twice in quick succession.

"Back against the wall. Quick!" Vargas waved a threatening gun.

The ranchers rose and obeyed like automatons, though Kendrick stumbled blindly as if he could not see. Vargas stepped over the dead body of Joel and the senseless body of Lucy, and approached the table, never taking his eyes from the men he covered. He holstered his left-hand gun, swept the money up from the table and crammed it into his pockets, still never taking his eyes from the men against the wall.

Then he whipped up the other gun again, and backed to the open doorway, carefully feeling his way with his feet, in order not to trip over Joel or Lucy. From the doorway he spoke once more.

"Now you can go on with your party. Don't any of you attempt to follow me. You know what happens to those who are foolish enough to try that."

Then he was gone, as swiftly and silently as he had come, leaving turmoil and tragedy behind him. Vargas was gone, all the money for the herds was gone, and Joel was dead. Dallas stood dry-eyed and sick with horror by the wall, and wished that he were dead, also.

The party was now only a ghastly debacle. The evening was a nightmare.

Dallas found himself alone in the blacksmith shop, hours later, dumb with misery, and never knew how he got there. He did not even know that he was alone. He heard nothing and saw nothing but that awful blast of Wheaton's gun and Joel dead on the floor, till he felt the grip of a hand on his shoulder, in the darkness, and heard Paul Kendrick's voice.

"Don't, Dal. Don't. I know, you didn't want him to do it. You tried to keep him from doin' it. Gandy told me. He heard you boys arguin' as you were coming toward the house, but he didn't know what it was you were tryin' to keep Joel from doin'."

"Yes, sir, that's the truth." Dallas choked and raised his face, but all he could see of Kendrick was his

white countenance, like a dull patch of old unbleached linen in the moonlight streaming through the window.

"I—I'm goin' away, boss. Right now, tonight. It wasn't my fault. I did do everything I could to stop him, but it wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been pullin' all them crazy stunts for years and got in the habit of it. I can't stay here."

"I—I reckon I know how you feel. But I—I—where you goin' Dallas?"

DALLAS straightened; and even in the darkness of the blacksmith shop, something of the thing that had been done to Dallas Markham breathed like a live presence. It sounded in the harshness of his voice, chilled, even, sinister and implacable.

"I'm goin' after Vargas."

Kendricks' hand dropped from the cowboy's shoulder. Because he was what he was, Paul Kendrick raised no argument. And because he understood all that could not be put into words, he said only, in a voice as grim and harsh as Dallas' had been:

"Yeah. Go. And by heaven, boy, you get him!"

"I'll get him," said Dallas.

"And, Dal—come back."

"I don't care whether I come back or not."

Kendrick cleared his throat, and passed a hand over his eyes.

"Take the best horse I got. Take anythin' you want on the ranch. I'll keep my mouth shut about where you've gone." He turned, and went silently out of the blacksmith shop.

But Dolores Lazaro had followed him. She saw where he went, saw him leave. And as Dallas started out of the blacksmith shop he found her standing there in the moonlight, waiting for him. He stopped short.

"Dal!" She stepped close, gripped his arms with her hands. "I was looking for you. I heard, Dal."

"It's on account of Joel."

"I know."

"And now—on account of you, too. You loved him, didn't you?"

"No," said Dolores steadily. "I love you. It was you all the time, Dal. But you wouldn't pay any attention to me. I see why, now."

"You can't keep me from goin'," said Dallas, in a sudden flare of grim fury. "If that's—"

"It isn't. I wouldn't try to keep you. But I want to tell you something, Dal. I want to give you something to take with you. Don't say it's foolish—I want to give you a charm, to keep you safe. Don't laugh."

"I couldn't—laugh."

"You mustn't blame yourself." Her voice quickened into a rush of words. "It's awful to think of Joel dead—but he had so much fun while he lived. Mrs. Wheaton says that's the way to live, enjoy every day as it passes, death comes so suddenly sometimes. Remember that, while you're out—out in the hills—after Vargas. And remember this, too. Vargas killed my mother."

Dallas started, and cried out under his breath. "Vargas—"

"Yes. When I was only four years old, he killed her. Remember that, and you'll know you have to get him. That's what I had to tell you. I never knew what became of my father. I think Vargas killed him, too. And this is what I wanted to give you. Here."

From under her dress, from around her throat, she drew a rosary, a long shining silver chain strung with glittering black beads, and the silver crucifix at the end gleamed in the moonlight as she laid it in Dallas' hand. It was not just an ordinary crucifix. The tiny figure on the cross had been done in colored enamels. It was as real as life, even to the crimson drops of blood draining from the hands and feet and from the gash in the side.

Dal lifted his gaze from the rosary to her face. "Your mother's?"

"Yes. Made for her. There probably isn't another quite like it in the world. She used to wear it. Just a little while before she was killed,

she took it off her own neck and put it on me. You wear it, Dal. To keep you from harm."

Dal's eyes clung to the crucifix as he raised the chain and placed it in Dolores' hand.

"I ain't bein' disrespectful, but that's what I'd like to do to Vargas—crucify him! You—you put it on me, Dolores." He took off his hat and bent his head.

She slipped the chain over his head, and dropped the crucifix upon his chest outside his shirt. A little silver crucifix, to keep a man from harm. Then suddenly she was sobbing, and Dal's arms were around her, and she was clinging to him with frantic hands.

"Oh, Dal—Dal—you have to come back. That's your charm, Dal! You can't die if you wear it. Dal—you have to get Vargas—and come right back."

They were so absorbed in each other that Gus Wheaton was almost upon them before they were aware of his presence. His gruff voice addressed Dolores, as the two sprang apart.

"Get to the house, Dolores. Ma and Alma want to go home right away. Nearly everybody else is gone. I want to talk to Dallas."

Dolores whirled and ran toward the house, choking back her sobs, and Wheaton stepped close to Dallas. The young man stood rigid, facing him with cold bleak eyes.

"I just wanted to tell you, Dal, that we all think it's about time for you to get out of this country," the rancher said curtly.

"I'm goin," said Dallas. "Tonight. Not that it's any of your business. But I'm comin' back."

"You better not," said Wheaton. "You've done enough—" His voice died in his throat as he caught the gleam of silver in the moonlight on Dal's shirt, and he leaned forward, gaping and staring. His face turned pasty.

"Where—where did yuh get that?" He started to reach toward it, but Dallas snatched his wrist and struck his hand away.

"What's it to you? Keep your hands off me, and anythin' that belongs to me!"

"That's not yours!" rasped Wheaton. "It belongs to Dolores. I saw her mother take it off her own neck and put it on Dolores!"

"You knew Dolores' mother?"

"I did. I found her dead body. That was the first killin' Vargas ever did in this valley, and I took Dolores home to raise with my own motherless gal. Only the two of 'em ain't been motherless since I married Ma Wheaton. You've got no business with that trinket. You give it back to Dolores, and get out."

"Dolores asked me to wear it." Dal raised his hand and dropped the little crucifix on his chest under his shirt. "You mind your own business, will you?" He wheeled and strode toward the barn, leaving Wheaton white-faced and staring in the lane.

CHAPTER IV

Crucify Him!

WHEN Dallas rode out of the barn a few moments later, Wheaton had gone. Dallas turned his mount across the field beside the barn; and only the moon, soaring high in the vault, watched him go, saw him bear steadily away toward the Kallina Hills, toward that valley from which he and Joel had watched Vargas ride by.

All that night and the next day he rode steadily, stopping only to rest and water his horse. He passed the valley and pressed on into the hills, looking for some sign that Vargas had lately passed that way.

By the next night he was so weary that sheer physical fatigue forced him to halt. He lay down and slept like the dead till dawn.

He rode all the next day, and still there was no sign of Vargas, and he circled again at evening back to the little valley where he and Joel had stopped that day. If he camped here, Vargas might ride by again. He ate a cold meal from the food in his saddlebags and lay down to sleep again. Sleep was hours long in coming, but it did claim him at last.

He awoke to a stinging slap across the face. He blinked his eyes at the early dawn light, and felt his whole body grow rigid.

Over him stood Vargas. There was a chilly smile on the killer's thin cruel face. In Vargas' left hand there dangled limply a pair of light tan kid gloves; the gloves that had slapped Dallas across the face and wakened him. The gun in Vargas' right hand was pointing directly at the prone cowboy's head.

"You are a sound sleeper." Vargas laughed mockingly. "Don't bother to look for your gun. I have it." He shrugged and stepped back. "Get up."

Dallas slowly got to his feet. Vargas surveyed him with black eyes that were as cold as obsidian taken out of a glacier. His face was dark, and his black hair was streaked with gray.

"You were looking for me, I suppose?" the killer asked.

"What do you think?" snapped Dallas.

"Ah, spirit!" Vargas raised his brows. "That's good. I'll need somebody like you when I call on Kallina Valley again. I'm glad you came."

"You're not usin' me for anythin' like that, nor for anythin' else." Dallas eyed him steadily, and felt no fear; nothing but a chill, savage determination to get the upper hand, to throw Vargas off guard for an instant, just long enough to give himself time to leap.

Thought flashed in his brain with the speed of light. What could he say that would trap the killer's attention? What could he say that would be so unexpected that—and he tensed. He had it!

"You couldn't harm me, Vargas," he said coolly. "I'm charmed against you—with a silver crucifix."

Vargas stared; then he laughed. "A crucifix! Ha! Have you ever read poetry, my brave young fool? There was a poem written once by a man named Kipling, about Anne of Austria, and Hans, the blue-eyed Dane, who wore as an amulet a little silver crucifix his lady Ultruda had given him. But—because he scorned Anne of Austria, in Fultah Fisher's boarding house, they slew Hans, the blue-eyed Dane—and 'Anne of Austria looted first the maid Ultruda's charm—the little silver crucifix, to keep a man from harm.'

"That's about how much good your little silver crucifix will do you. Go over there and saddle your horse and get on it. We're riding."

Dallas didn't move. His eyes were on the killer and his thoughts were floundering for a ruse—and chance, any opening, however small—to get his gun back. Somehow he knew that Vargas wouldn't shoot him unless he was forced to, because the killer wanted to use him in another bandit raid.

"Saddle up!" Vargas barked, waving the muzzle of his gun menacingly.

SUDDENLY Dallas realized that he had to die anyway. Far better to die here in an attempt to best the killer than to be used as a shield while Vargas shot his way through the ranchers at some gathering in the valley, and then be shot by the killer afterward.

"No," Dallas said grimly, "I'm not saddlin' up. The devil take you and your orders. Shoot if you want to!"

He held the killer's gaze while Vargas stepped forward. The end of the gun barrel ticked on the buttons on Dallas' shirt. Though Dallas didn't lower his eyes he could almost see the hammer being drawn back by the killer's thumb. He steeled him-

self against what he was sure would happen—but it didn't happen.

Vargas' left hand clenched into a fist. The fist swung upward, and Dallas reeled backward with the terrific impact. He fell, and as his body hit the ground he felt a gouging pain in his ribs where he had come into contact with a sharp rock, half imbedded in the earth.

Vargas' blow had only stunned him for the moment, and had failed to blank out coherent thought. He slid his hand under him to cover the jagged rock, at the same time bracing himself in an attempt to rise.

But Vargas was over him. Before Dallas could sink back to the earth there was the glint of sun on silvered steel as the killer's gun rose and fell. Still half numb from the blow on the chin, Dallas wilted limply as the end of the barrel cracked on his forehead in a glancing blow that split the skin from hair to eyebrow.

For Dallas everything went dark, but his hand was still on the rock. Vargas uttered a cold, contemptuous laugh.

"So you won't saddle up, eh?" the killer jeered. "We'll see!"

He bent over his saddle for a moment, removing a coil of small rope. He returned to Dallas and started tying his feet. It was a clumsy task, looping the rope with his left hand while he held the gun in his right. Dallas' limbs were limp. Vargas replaced the gun in its holster and jerked the rope tight in several half hitches around his captive's ankles. Holding the rope taut in his left hand, he reached for Dallas' left arm to pull it behind him to be tied.

For that instant both Vargas' hands were busy and his attention was on the rope. Dallas' eyes opened narrowly and his right hand, clutching the sharp rock swung up and around in an arc that had behind it the cunning of desperation, the force of hate, and—luck.

The killer saw the blow coming and shrank from it, but it was too late to evade all its force. His hand flashed to his holster but before he could fire, the sharp broken edge of the stone in Dallas' hand crashed against his temple. Dallas' left hand leaped up and grasped the gun-barrel, but the weapon was held too firmly for him to wrench it away.

Again Dallas crashed the sharp stone furiously against the killer's skull, and Vargas' body sagged. His hand relaxed on the butt of the gun. Dallas jerked it from the limp fingers, and staggered to his feet.

Vargas opened his eyes and found that he was staring into the bore of his own gun, and the gun he had taken from Dallas was back in its own holster.

Dallas stood swaying, his breath heaving in his lungs, a small rivulet of blood draining down one cheek from the cut on his forehead. But the gun in his hand was steady.

"So you thought you had me, eh?" he panted. "Well, the table's turned, Mister Kid Gloves Vargas."

"It seems you have the advantage—for the moment." Vargas was regaining his control, and his eyes watched Dallas intently, hawklike.

"Yeah," Dallas answered harshly. "I have the advantage and I'm goin' to keep it. You're goin' to get what's comin' to you." He took a step nearer the prone man and bent over him. "Curse you, Vargas, I'm goin' to make you pay for every life you ever took. I'm goin' to nail you to a tree and let you hang there till you die!"

Suddenly Dallas became aware that the other man wasn't looking at his face, but at something that hung from the open throat of his shirt. Still keeping the gun aimed at the killer's heart, Dallas raised his left hand to his shirt front, and his fingers touched the silver crucifix by the thin chain.

It had dropped out during the short, terrific struggle.

Vargas' eyes were fixed, widening, on the crucifix that gleamed against the dark blue flannel, the little

enameled figure clearly outlined. The killer's face drained of all color, breaking from its cruel mask like something of granite breaking. His features worked, and he tried to speak; then his face smoothed again, and the black eyes were again only hard, bleak, obsidian, though they gleamed as if they had been wet.

"Is that—is that your crucifix?"

Dallas' hard gaze narrowed, suspecting a trick. "Yes, it is. What's it to you?"

Vargas got slowly to his feet. "It was my—wife's." The killer's voice thinned to a silence so vast that Dallas could hear his own heart pounding in his ears. Then the thin voice went on, strangely weary.

"Dolores and I were happy, once. She never knew that the money I brought her was taken from others who had too much. Then *he* came. I never knew who he was. He told my wife things she had not known. He made her hate me. He made her love him . . .

"In books, wives who go away always leave letters behind. Some of them really do that. Mine did. That was how I knew about him. That was how I knew she had hidden our little daughter away and started to go with him in Kallina Valley. That was how I knew where to find her when I followed her.

"And I killed her. I killed her, do you hear? I never found my child, or I—I might have been different. I don't know. But I killed Dolores. I went bad, I think. I wanted to kill every man in Kallina Valley, and every time I did kill one I laughed and thought that it might be *him*. That was—well, I just kept going. I got started killing, and I couldn't stop. I—"

"Is that true?" Dallas demanded hoarsely.

"Certainly it's true. What of it? What does it matter now? Only—where did you get that crucifix?"

"Your daughter gave it to me, to keep me safe. She's goin' to marry me." Dallas wet his lips. His mouth felt dry, his throat tight. He was seeing Gus Wheaton there in the lane, staring at the crucifix, and he knew who had taken Vargas' wife.

HE SAID blindly: "And I—I can't kill you now. I can't kill her father."

Vargas stood like a stone, and there was no more expression in his face than there is in dirty gray stone.

"No," he agreed. "No, you can't. You've done worse than that. There is more than one way of crucifying a man. Go back—and let this teach you never to be the kind of fool I've been. I'll give you the money I took from the ranch-house that night. I have it here in the pack on my horse. I'll get it. I'm not playing any trick. You can keep me covered and satisfy yourself of that."

He turned and walked to his horse. For a moment he fumbled with the pack roll, drew out of it two small sacks and carried them over to where Dallas' riding gear lay. He tossed them down upon the saddle. Not once did Dallas' gun waver from its steady following of the killer's every move.

"You're goin' back with me, Vargas," said Dallas quietly.

"Yes, of course. Never let—my daughter know. But I have something else for you to deliver. I'll get that also."

Again he walked to his horse and reached into the saddle roll. Before Dallas had the least intimation of his intent, Vargas whipped a gun from the saddle roll, raised it to his temple, and fired.

Dallas shut his eyes. There was the echo of that one crashing report, and the thud of something falling, and silence. Another echo, faint and far:

"Something else for you to deliver."

An outlaw's body—dead or alive—five thousand dollars.

Dallas cried out, and dragged his stinging eyes open. Vargas lay crumpled on his face, blood stream-

ing from his shattered head, a smoking revolver on the ground beside his nerveless hand. . . .

LATE the next afternoon, leading Vargas' riderless horse, Dallas rode up to the back yard of the Circle K, and the boys came running from the bunkhouse to meet him. But Paul Kendrick reached him first; Paul Kendrick, and Dolores, who had come to see if there was any word from Dal.

"Son!" cried Kendrick, and Dallas smiled whitely as he got stiffly from the saddle. "Did you get him?"

"I—I got the money he took," Dallas answered, and his eyes went to Dolores' face, almost as haggard as his own. "He—he's dead." He lifted the money sacks and laid them across Kendrick's arm.

Kendrick stared at the empty saddle on Vargas' horse.

"But—the body, son! There's a reward, you know," he questioned.

"I—" Dallas swallowed—"I buried him. I don't want the reward."

Kendrick looked once into Dallas' eyes. And because Paul Kendrick was what he was, he never spoke of that matter again.

The Circle K cowboys halted several feet away in a hushed group, as Dolores threw herself into Dal's arms.

"Did you—kill him?" she asked.

Dal's arms gripped her close, her face against his breast, so that she could not look into his eyes and read what was there as Kendrick had done. Over her head, his gaze sought Kendrick, as he answered:

"I—I didn't have to. I found him —dead."

Kendrick's eyes fixed on the gleaming emblem which somehow had caught in Dolores' hair, and shimmered there, like a symbol—a promise.

"What's that?" he asked sharply.

Dallas blinked back something that stung his eyes. "A—little silver crucifix—to keep a man from harm."

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Wild Bill Hickock's Early Start

WILD BILL HICKOK'S career as a man of daring appears to have begun when he was but nineteen. That was the age at which he left his home in Illinois to seek his fortune further West.

He paused at Independence, Missouri, a post village en route to Kansas City. There he was befriended by a saloon keeper who gave him some odd jobs to do in return for food and lodging.

There were but two saloons in town then and both were the focal points of the teamsters transporting goods westward. These men worked hard on the road and drank harder when they came to a junction town.

About a dozen were drinking heavily in the saloon owned by Hickok's friend and as the drinks took effect they grew quarrelsome among themselves. Soon they were fighting, throwing around the saloon furniture. The saloon keeper intervened, and during a tussle slugged one fellow pretty badly. The crowd turned on him and he had to run for it.

They chased him to a house where he locked himself in. They surrounded it and threatened to set the place afire if he didn't come and take his licking.

Young Hickok heard the commotion and gravitated toward it out of curiosity. Learning that the besieged man was his friend, he drew his two guns, stepped out of the crowd and confronted the proddy teamsters.

"You leave that fellow be, or there'll be more dead men around here than this town can afford to bury. Start hiking out of town, before I start shooting," he is reported to have said. Thirty minutes later not a teamster was left in town.

A month later Wild Bill, who had been christened James, also left town. He went as a teamster.

—Tex Gainsville.

Buck swung around and fired, hoping to drive back his pursuers

FRAMED AT WOLFHEAD

By GUNNISON STEELE

Buck Flynn was a peaceful and easy-going Texan until the wrong person took his name in vain!

ABRUPTLY young Buck Flynn sat erect in his blankets, sleepy eyes peering about the interior of the old hut which had served him as shelter for the night. Quite plainly he could hear the sounds that had awakened him—the drumming of high-power rifles, intermixed with the staccato popping of six-guns.

Hurriedly the stocky, towheaded cowboy pulled on his boots, strapped on his .45 and went outside. Behind the hut was a range of hills, purple and misty in the dawn, and flowing nearby was a shallow little stream which lost itself as it wound across a sandy mesa that was slashed by gullies and arroyos. To the south was rangeland. North, ten miles away, was the rip-roaring cowtown of Wolfhead, Arizona.

As Buck Flynn stood beside the stream and listened, the gunshots

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grew louder, seemingly coming from across the flat mesa. Straining his eyes, he could see a dust cloud boiling out there.

Suddenly the sun rose above the mesa, shooting crimson streamers of light across the land. And now the stocky cowboy could see two distinct and separate dust clouds breezing across the mesa a mile away, could hear a rising crescendo of hoofbeats against alkali mingled with the gunshots.

Then he glimpsed a head bobbing above the stunted mesquite, a head that was wreathed with gun smoke as the rider fired back over his shoulder at other bobbing heads. The hard riding man was headed straight toward the hut where Buck had spent the night.

The smoky-gray eyes of the blond buckaroo darted quickly about. Here, bearing down upon him with pounding hoofs, was trouble. With his bedroll inside the hut, and his horse tethered in a grass patch near by, there was no time to run. After all, why should he run? Man hunts, in Texas, were rather common, and he supposed they were here in Arizona, too.

Now the lone rider was pounding across the mesa, a few hundred yards ahead of the six men who were trailing him. Mounted on a gaunt roan, he was bent low, quirting the beast, firing back over his shoulder. Suddenly horse and rider darted into a ravine and were lost to view.

And as suddenly they popped out of a gully not a hundred yards from the hut and streaked toward the young cowboy who stood waiting tensely. The rider, Buck Flynn saw, was as rawboned as the mount he bestrode. Gray-faced, tight-lipped, hard of eye, he was rather young, dressed as an ordinary cowpoke, with crisscrossed gunbelts about his lean waist.

THE roan slithered to a halt twenty feet from the hut, and the gray-faced man hit the ground running, rifle in hand.

"Git inside!" he rapped. "The devil's fixing to bust loose!"

"Now, wait a minute," said Buck coolly. "I don't savvy this play. Why should I git inside?"

"You'll see, mighty quick!"

At that instant the pursuing band burst from the mouth of the ravine, firing as they came, the slugs snarling about the heads of the two men. Buck Flynn turned without further urging and followed the tall man inside the hut.

The gaunt cowboy slammed the door, latched it. Then he ran to a window, stuck his rifle through and slammed a bullet at the charging horsemen.

The horsemen scattered, dodged for shelter.

"Come on," yelled the gaunt man, "and git a dose of lead in your worm-eaten hides!"

"See here," Buck protested, "what's it all about? Who are them hombres, and why are they chasin' you? What—?"

"One at a time, cowboy," grinned the man. "I'm Jim Seton, and right now I'm ridin' for the Cattlemen's Association of this state. The gents out there are a part of the Storm River rustler gang. I been hornin' in on some of their deals lately, and they're out to get me. That help any?"

"Yeah! They're after your scalp, huh?"

Seton pulled his rifle back, for he could see nothing to shoot at, and gazed searchingly at the stocky cowboy whose bronzed, square-chinned face was darker than his hair.

"Who're you?" he grunted.

"Name's Flynn," said Buck frankly, "from Texas. Ever hear of old Square Flynn who, up till a month ago, was boss and owner of the Great Northern gamblin' hall and drink emporium over in Wolfhead? Well, he was my uncle, and he willed the Great Northern to me. I'm ridin' in now, to take charge."

"Square Flynn," said Seton

earnestly, "was one of the best friends I ever had. Listen, cowboy, unless I miss my guess, old Square was murdered by them same polecats out there!"

Suddenly the gaunt man whirled, shoved his rifle through the window and fired at a figure that showed itself for an instant. The man staggered, fell from view behind a boulder. The rest of the men Seton had called rustlers now opened up with their rifles, the bullets smacking harmlessly into the thick walls.

Abruptly the firing ceased, and some one yelled:

"You, Seton! We got you cornered. Come out, or it'll go hard with you!"

"Go peddle your prunes, dang you!" Seton laughed harshly. "Think I crave to stretch rope?"

"There's worse things! Who's with you?"

"A gent what knows skunks when he smells 'em. If you want us, come in and git us!"

Taking advantage of the conversation, a man had crept up close to the hut. Now he suddenly reared up and slammed a bullet through a window, the slug slashing through Buck Flynn's hat brim. Seton's rifle roared. The man outside screamed, pitched forward on his face into a gully.

The attackers opened up fiercely. Two of the remaining four circled the hut and started firing through the west window.

Buck crossed to the window, crouched with six-gun in hand. Although not understanding fully what all this was about, he was convinced that those men out there would kill him as quickly as they would Seton. Hadn't Seton said they were rustlers, and hinted that they were the ones who'd slit old "Square" Flynn's throat from ear to ear?

Gun shoved over the sill, he waited.

He didn't have long to wait. The big six-gun blazed and roared. A burly, black-whiskered man who had sought to dart to a more advantageous position, suddenly clutched his breast and slumped to the ground. Buck stared in amazement, for he had fired at the man's legs. He lowered his gun, staring through gunsmoke.

Then he saw something that shocked him as if a bucket of icy water had been flung over him. Glittering in the bright rays of the rising sun, he saw a star on the breast of the fallen man.

Another man darted from his shelter, seized the inert man and dragged him behind a boulder, and Buck heard him yell to his companions on the opposite side of the hut:

"Boys, the coyotes have killed the sheriff!"

The Texas buckaroo whirled on Seton.

"Seton," he said angrily. "That man out there was a lawman. I saw his star. You said they was rustlers!"

For a while Seton said nothing, just crouched there and peered through the window. The possemen were giving up the fight; half their number dead or wounded, they were riding back across the mesa, three saddles filled with limp, dangling figures.

"Yeah, I lied to you," Seton agreed finally. "I stuck up a bank over at Gold Pines three days ago. Them lawmen was hot on my heels: I had to do somethin'. If you knowed I was a hold-up guy, you'd maybe turned your gun on me. So I told you a little lie, which it didn't amount to much. That was Sheriff Norton you plugged."

Seton grinned cheerfully, as if the grim trick he'd played on the cowpoke was one to laugh over.

FOR a while Buck Flynn was furiously angry. Always he had shunned men who rode outside the law. An hour before he had been a carefree cowboy, riding from Texas to take charge of a drink emporium he had inherited from his uncle, old

Square Flynn.

Now—he had killed a sheriff! The full truth slapped him in the face like a blow. He couldn't go on to Wolfhead. From now on, he must be a fugitive, probably with a price on his head. Shortly a posse would be storming down the trails toward the Border, bent on bringing to grim justice the two men who had shot down a sheriff and two of his deputies.

His gorge rose at his bitter thoughts. But far better to ride the outlaw trails, he decided, than to stretch rope for something of which he felt he was guiltless.

"I'm ridin' for old Mexico," said Seton with a hint of pity in his voice. "Better string along, kid. You can't stay in this country; you can't never come back, not for many a year, anyhow."

Well, why not? Seton knew the ropes and they'd be safe there.

They rode away from the old hut together.

The Border was twenty miles away. They crossed it that night, and dawn found them ten miles below the line, in a tough, dirty, evil-smelling little Mexican town.

They slept some that day, and Seton tanked up on a fiery liquid in a squalid hovel which they visited. He stayed disgustingly drunk that night, the next day and the next.

During the third night Seton disappeared. He didn't say where he was going, or why. Just vanished.

Buck stayed in the Mexican town a week longer, waiting for Seton to return. But Seton didn't come back. And the longer he stayed in the bad-smelling town of filth and goats and mongrels, the more the Texas waddy resented what Seton had done to him.

Finally he got a stomachful of Mexicans, and of whites who were worse. He decided to ride back North and take a chance on being recognized as Sheriff Norton's killer.

Two weeks after his flight from the hut, Buck Flynn rode into the upper end of the main and only street of Wolfhead, Arizona.

Wolfhead was just close enough to the Border to attract the scum from both sides; a hotbed of gunhounds, knife-men and thieves; where a man might hire his most hated enemy murdered for twenty dollars. But there were a few honest men in town, and Sheriff Norton was, or had been, one of them.

Buck Flynn leaned against a hitchrack and stared with narrowed eyes along the dusty street. The sun had set and shadows filled the street. Dust clouds swirled as occasional groups of punchers rode into town. Other groups clumped noisily along the board sidewalks. A good many dirty, furtive Mexicans slouched along the darkening street.

With smouldering, wary eyes the Texas waddy watched the parade, six-gun pulled well forward on his left hip. But, aside from casual glances, no one paid him any attention.

The center of activity seemed to be a rambling frame building directly across the street from Buck. A continual stream of loud-mouthed, swaggering men trickled in and out of the building, and from within came sounds of abandoned revelry.

Sprawled across the false front of the building were the words, GREAT NORTHERN.

"Stranger hereabouts, ain't you?"

The dry, rasping voice at his elbow caused Buck Flynn to whirl, hand flashing to gun-butt. He confronted a wizened, wrinkle-faced little old man who was regarding him with gimlet eyes. The little man was slouchily dressed, with a pair of big guns on his bony hips and a star on his ragged vest.

"Maybe." Buck's hot eyes bored into the gimlet ones. "Anything wrong in that?"

"Touchy, ain't you?" the man grinned. "Can't a man stand here and listen to the fun," he gestured toward the place across the street,

"without bein' plugged by some hair-trigger cowpoke?"

Buck drew a breath of relief. This dried-up little hombre, who evidently had been appointed sheriff after Sheriff Norton's death, didn't recognize him as a man wanted for murder.

"What's goin' on over there?" he asked carelessly.

"Same as usual." The little man spat disgustedly. "The Great Northern ain't what it was when old Square Flynn was roddin' it."

"Who's bossin' it now?"

"Square's nephew, from Texas, young hellion by name of Buck Flynn. Square'd rear up in his grave if he could see what's goin' on here. Long as he was roddin' it, it was a place for decent men to drink in. But since young Flynn took charge a week ago it's turned into a hog-wallow, with nothin' in it but swine."

Fortunately, the gloom hid from the little man the stunned amazement on Buck Flynn's face, amazement that was supplanted almost instantly by a coldly calm rage.

"What does this Flynn look like?" he asked tersely.

"Tall, lank, gray-faced. A bad hombre, if I ever saw one. Didn't waste no time in changin' Square's lay-out when he got here. Everything was straight then—now it's crooked as a barrel of snakes.

"Brought three, four mean-lookin' gents to Wolfhead with him. Then there's Jake Scrud, who'd been old Square's bartender for a good many years. Since Flynn bowed in, Scrud has quit bar-swabbin', and him and that Texas hombre has took up like long brothers. Never liked Jake Scrud, I didn't."

"What does Scrud look like?"

"Big, black-whiskered, snake-eyed."

"And what might your moniker be, mister?"

The wrinkled little old man stared at Buck Flynn.

"Dang it, cowboy—you ask a mighty lot of questions. But if it makes any difference, I'm Sheriff Norton. Why?"

"Just curious."

Buck turned and clumped along the street toward the livery stable. It was dark now, and the glow from oil lamps seeped from the doors and windows of Wolfhead's shacks.

In the livery stable Buck saddled his big bay gelding and left him in readiness for a speedy exit from Wolfhead.

PAUSING just inside the swinging doors of the Great Northern, his narrowed eyes swept the big room.

Kerosene lamps cast a yellowish glow over the room that was crowded with hard-faced men. A stench of raw whisky and stale beer permeated the place. Roulette wheels whirred, poker chips and dice clicked; an ill-tuned piano blared, and over-painted women whirled in the arms of loud-mouthed, swaggering men.

Buck Flynn pushed his way to the bar, ordered beer, and leaned confidentially across toward the barkeep. "Where's Flynn?" he asked.

The fat barkeep stared hard at the stocky young cowboy, and jerked his head shortly toward a door that obviously opened into a rear portion of the house.

Buck left his drink untouched, and picked his way through the crowd toward the back door. He opened a door, went through, closed it. He found himself in a dark hallway, with only a tiny glimmer of light on down the corridor. Walking silently as a big cat, he went toward the glimmer of light.

The light seeped through a crack underneath a door. From within the room came a murmur of voices. Buck crouched, placed his eye to the keyhole.

He could see a smoky lamp on a small table, and beside the lamp a bottle and four glasses. He could also see two men, and the feet of two others under the table.

His first glance at those two men

he could see fully turned the suspicion that had been pounding at his brain to a certainty, and with the certainty came a blind, unreasoning rage.

For the man facing the door, a smirking grin on his hawkish face, was Jim Seton, and the man beside him was the burly fake sheriff who had played dead at the old hut two weeks ago. The bearded man, Buck knew, was Scrud, old Square's former barkeep.

The four men in the room were talking, laughing and drinking, and above the noise from the barroom Buck caught snatches of conversation.

"I told you it'd work, didn't I?" That was Seton's bragging voice. "The poor sap thinks he killed a sheriff. He won't never come back."

"It was my idea," declared the burly Scrud. "That dumb sheriff thinks you're Flynn. We got this layout—bring us boocoo dinero."

—"won't never forget the look on that cowpoke's face when you fell," Seton grinned. "Yeah, Scrud, you played a slick game."

"Five long years I swabbed bar for old Flynn, takin' his kicks and cusses like a dog. It was me that got him to make that will, leavin' everythin' to that sap nephew out in Texas, and it was me that slipped a knife betwixt the old wolf's ribs.

"Then I sent for you, Seton, because I need a young feller with nerve who looks some like this Buck Flynn to somebody who ain't never seen him. Then it was easy to watch for this cow nurse as he rides in, and pull that fake man-chase which got shut of him without any dirty work. Don't forget, it was my idea."

Buck Flynn straightened. All too clearly now he understood the cunning frameup of which he had been made the gullible goat. The men in there were still laughing about the ease with which they had framed him, made him believe he had killed a sheriff, so that he would flee, thereby leaving Seton free to take his place as the supposed heir of old Square Flynn.

They could have killed him just as easily, Buck knew. But he also guessed that the bodies of dead men, in Sheriff Norton's county, had an unpleasant habit of turning up at unexpected moments to embarrass those who would rather hear no more about it.

And the scheme had worked—almost.

If he had paused to think, probably Buck would have acted differently. But he didn't think. Relentless anger flamed in his brain. Gun in hand, he suddenly flung his hundred and seventy pounds of brawn against the door.

The door, unlocked, crashed inward.

The four men reared up, the hand of each sliding toward a holstered gun. But the hands stopped, and they stood with tensed bodies, staring at the cold-eyed buckaroo in the doorway.

"So I'm a sap?" Buck sneered. "Yeah, I guess I was! It was a slick trick—but it ain't gonna work. Seton, you slimy-bellied snake, you ain't gonna frame nobody else!"

A crafty flame burned in Seton's hard eyes. "Now, don't take it so hard, cowboy. I admit we played a little joke on you, but we can explain it easy."

"Darn your explainin'!" Buck spat. "You ain't foolin' me twice. Unbuckle your gunbelts and let 'em fall, all of you!"

"Now, wait a minute." Seton's eyes shifted uneasily to the other three men. "We can fix this up, can't we Scrud?"

"It's already fixed," Jake Scrud sneered. "Flynn, you poor sap, look behind you."

IT WAS an old trick, and if it had not been for the ungovernable rage that held Buck Flynn in its grip, it wouldn't have worked. As it was, just for an instant the blond waddy's eyes flicked away from the

four crouched men.

Scrud clawed suddenly for his gun, but it never cleared leather. Buck Flynn's gun roared and spewed a rope of flame across the room into the big man's stomach. Scrud collapsed.

Seton slammed the lamp against the floor, plunging the room into blackness that was instantly crisscrossed by red tongues of flame from guns in the hands of Seton and his two cronies.

Flinging a couple of bullets at the spot where he had last seen Seton, Buck dropped flat on the floor. Then, to the tune of hot lead ripping into the floor about him, he crawled through the door into the hallway, gained his feet and ran. At the same time he was conscious that the blare of noises in the barroom had stopped, that the door had been flung open and men were streaming into the corridor.

The corridor terminated at an open window. Buck went through, hit the ground running. He circled the building, clambered over a board fence and found himself again on Wolfhead's main street. Men were running excitedly toward the Great Northern. The gimlet-eyed little sheriff scurried past, a six-gun in his gnarled paw.

Buck Flynn went to the livery stable, mounted the bay and rode out of Wolfhead, and again headed for the Border. Only this time there was no fake killing, for Jake Scrud had paid with his life for his duplicity.

And the Texas Buckaroo knew that Sheriff Norton, although he obviously had no liking for the man Buck knew as Seton, would have a posse baying on his trail within thirty minutes.

It was a desperate race for the Border.

But Buck Flynn lost the race.

Seven or eight miles from Wolfhead the bay went suddenly lame. Buck was in a quandary. By slow travel, the bay might make the line, but never ahead of the posse. He was trapped.

With the trailing posse would be Seton and his cronies. The sheriff would be bent on Buck's capture for trial, but Seton would be bent grimly on his sudden and complete extermination, for his capture alive might well mean disaster for their well laid plans. Only the alertness of his wits, Buck knew, would keep him from stretching rope or stopping a bullet.

Finally he came to the stream that flowed down from the hills and past the old hut. Striking the stream a mile below the hut, he urged the crippled bay into the water and rode slowly downstream. But after another mile he left the stream and rode into the mouth of a rocky little ravine where he decided to stop for a rest which both he and the bay needed badly.

He crouched there and watched the posse as it passed and raced with thundering hoofs on toward the Border. He knew they would soon discover his absence on the trail, and by dawn would have a cordon of men combing the brush for him.

He was right. Dawn brought two men along the little stream.

One of the men was Sheriff Norton, the other Seton. They were within three hundred yards of the ravine in which Buck had taken refuge before he saw them.

Evidently they had been following the stream, but now they left it and came riding slowly toward him, eyes scanning the ground.

Quickly Buck slapped leather on the lame bay, mounted and slipped over the rim of the ravine, hoping to lose himself in the brush before he was discovered. He circled, headed back toward the creek. But luck was against him. One of the shod hoofs of the bay struck a rock with a resounding clin-k!

He heard the sheriff bawl:

"There he is, off to the right! Head back for the creek!"

Buck heard a rifle bellow, felt the hot breath of a bullet as it whizzed

by his ear. Through a rift in the brush he saw Seton, rifle hugged to his cheek, steadying his plunging horse for another shot.

Throwing caution to the winds, Buck spurred the bay madly. The gelding plunged into a gully, and out, and headed at a stumbling gallop for the creek. Seton's rifle roared again, and again, and the little sheriff's bellow rose above the rifle's pounding.

"Stop your hoss, cowpoke, or we'll down you, by cracky!" Once Buck swung around in the saddle and fired, hoping to drive back his pursuers but they came on.

But Buck gained the creek and, momentarily out of range of Seton's bullets, spurred the bay along the dry bed. The stream bed here was probably a hundred yards across from bank to bank, and at certain seasons of the year was filled with a torrent of muddy water; but now there was only a sluggish stream a few yards wide in the center of the channel.

On both sides of the stream was an expanse of sand and sun-dried mud. A hundred yards below where Buck plunged over the bank, a mud-crusted flat extended from the ribbon of water to within a few feet of the overhanging bank. This mud flat had the appearance of firm footing. But the desperate eyes of Buck Flynn saw at a glance the truth—the dried mud flat was in reality a huge "soap hole."

The dry-looking crust was deceptive; for underneath the crust was a jellylike mess of slimy mud that was almost bottomless. Anyone breaking through the crust would probably be sucked to a horrible death in the stinking mass of ropy soap.

The bay, sensing the treachery of the flat, swerved sharply aside. Once past the morass, Buck pulled the gelding back onto the sandy creek bed, flinging a glance over his shoulder. Seton, mounted on a faster horse than the sheriff, was just plunging into the creek bed. Spurring viciously, Seton sent his mount pounding along the sandy bed.

The gaunt man, at another time, probably would have sensed the deadly peril that lurked before him; but now he was intent only on getting close enough to send a bullet into the back of the man ahead of him. Sheriff Norton, fifty feet behind, bawled a warning. But Seton failed to grasp its meaning.

But Seton's mount sensed the nature of the slimy trap ahead, if its rider did not. The animal plunged its fore-feet into the sand, abruptly checking its forward momentum.

BUT Seton didn't stop. Riding loosely, rifle to shoulder, he sailed through the air. He landed twenty feet in front of the pony, in the most deadly portion of the slimy hole. Landing on his feet, he broke through the dry crust and plunged to his waist.

His mount whirled, galloped off. The sheriff swerved, rode on past the morass, intent on capturing the fleeing cowboy. But at Seton's cry of terror, he turned and rode back. Buck Flynn stopped, too. He grinned, hooked a leg over the horn of his saddle and watched.

Seton, thrashing wildly about, had managed to crawl a few feet, but in his terror had only scrambled deeper into the death trap. Slowly the black, ropy slime was sucking him down.

"Help!" he screamed, his face twisted into a mask of dread. "I'm bein' sucked under! Throw me a rope, Norton!"

The sheriff dismounted and ran toward the trapped man. But when he got within twenty feet of Seton the ground began to quiver, and he stopped and backed hastily away.

"I got no rope," he said. "Stop wigglin' about—that only makes you go faster. You got a rope on your saddle?"

"No! You got to do somethin' quick—I'm goin' under."

Norton's gimlet eyes darted

quickly about, searching for something with which he could pull Seton from the soap hole. Momentarily he had forgotten Buck Flynn. But now he suddenly saw him sitting calmly on his crippled horse a hundred yards up the creek. The sheriff waved his arms wildly.

"Hey, cowboy!" he yelled. "Got a rope?"

Buck rode unhurriedly back to within fifty feet of the two men.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I say, dang it, have you got a rope?"

"Yeah, I got a rope."

"Well, come arunnin' with it! Can't you see this gent's sinkin'? Soon be up to his eyes."

"Be your age, Norton," Buck Flynn laughed harshly. "Why should I care if that polecat sinks?"

"Dang it, man," cried Norton angrily, "gimme that rope!"

"Shuck your rod," said Buck calmly, "and toss it on the sand. Then we'll talk it over."

The wiry sheriff cursed in helpless anger, but tossed his six-gun to the sand. Buck rode closer.

"For God's sake, do somethin'!" Seton begged in abject terror. "I'll die like a rat! Throw me somethin' to hold me up!"

Norton grabbed at the coiled rope on Buck's saddle—and stared into the blond buckaroo's gun muzzle.

"Not so fast, Norton! This is my lariat, and I don't like to get it all smelly by ropin' skunks with it."

"Dang it, man," Norton snapped angrily, "gimme that rope!"

"Get back," Buck rasped, "or I'll kill you! That hombre's in the slime, and he'll strangle like the snake he is—if he don't do some talkin'!"

"Ain't no time for talkin'—that slime's up to his neck now."

Dispassionately Buck looked at the man in the soap hole. It was true; the ropy mud had covered Seton's armpit, was licking greedily about his corded throat. Seton was whimpering like a trapped animal, gray face distorted by the stark fear that gripped him.

"Let 'im die," said Buck calmly. "He aimed to kill me, didn't he? But I'll drag him out—if he'll talk first."

"What you mean—talk?"

"What I said. Sheriff, you think that mud hen is Buck Flynn. He ain't. I'm Buck Flynn. That's all I aim to tell you; I aim to let that gent in the mud tell you about it."

"Seton," he asked the whimpering man, "you crave to talk?"

"Yeah, yeah!" gibbered the trapped man. "I'll do anythin', only get me outa this hellish hole. I'm sinkin' fast—"

"Start talkin'," said Buck stubbornly.

Seton talked. In his horrible fear of the slimy, viscous stuff that was licking about his throat, he blurted the whole story of the frame-up.

When he had gasped out his story, the gimlet-eyed little lawman peered thoughtfully at the man in the soap hole.

"Fooled me, huh? Well, by heck, I don't reckon there was such a hurry about that rope, after all. It'll do that slick hombre plenty good to get some of that slime in his eyes and ears!"

THREE GREAT NOVELS BY TOP-HAND WRITERS IN EVERY ISSUE OF

TRIPLE WESTERN

A BIG QUARTER'S WORTH AT ALL STANDS!

By
BRADFORD SCOTT

BLUE LIGHTNIN'

When two model citizens enter an ornery razorback in the state fair — there's no telling what may happen!

"HANGFOOT," said Benchleg Bowles, "do you know, there's gonna be a hawg show over to Wisdom."

Hangfoot Harley regarded Benchleg owlishly. "What do you mean, hawg?" he demanded.

"Well," amended Benchleg, "they calls it a county fair, but hawgs is gonna be the main attraction."

"Hawgs!" Hangfoot snorted. "Who'd be interested in hawgs?"

"Lots of folks," declared Benchleg. "They eats 'em."

"Hawgs ain't got no business in a cow country," grumbled Hangfoot. "Who's responsible for this dang hawg excitement?"

Benchleg explained. "You know that them farmin' people from back East built Wisdom. I heard tell that hawg shows an' things is sorta popular where they come from. Guess they got homesick and needed one."

Hangfoot grunted and stared gloomily at the rain streaking the bunkhouse window. Benchleg looked speculative.

"They're offerin' fifty dollars for the likeliest lookin' hawg," he said. "Hangfoot, we oughta get into that show."

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"We ain't hawgs," growled Hangfoot. "Leastwise, I ain't."

"I ain't either," disclaimed Benchleg, "but we gotta get a hawg. Hangfoot, let's put Blue Lightnin' in that show."

Hangfoot's stare said plainly that the lanky cowboy had lost his senses.

"Put that old Oklahoma razorback in a hawg show!" he gulped. "Benchleg, are you plumb loco?"

Benchleg's long face was creased with earnestness.

"You remember the time we fed Blue Lightnin' corn soaked in whisky?" he asked. "Remember how he got drunk and went to sleep? That hawg's crazy about whisky-soaked corn, and you know it. He's the biggest and bustin'est razorback in the whole state o' Oklahoma, and he'd have any other hawg in that show roped and corralled.

"All we gotta do is get him drunk, load him into a buckboard and haul him to the fair. Then we keep on feedin' him whisky-and-corn and keep him drunk. He wins the first prize, we get fifty dollars and everything's lovely."

Hangfoot oozed scorn. "Of all the goshawful damphool idears!" he began.

"Hangfoot," said Benchleg softly, "the Lazy-B is puttin' a hawg in that show."

The fat puncher's face abruptly turned scarlet.

His breath puffed wildly and he seemed to swell.

"Where did that outfit of wide-loopin' sidewinders get a prize hawg?" he demanded.

"They got one they been raisin' a year," Benchleg said. "I hear tell he's a buster and they're bettin' two to one he'll lope off with first prize."

Hangfoot's boots hit the floor with a thud. "I'll get the corn! You get the whisky!"

Benchleg knew where Blue Lightnin' hung out in the Black Hills. Getting him drunk and loaded into a buckboard was but a matter of patience and labor.

After dark they arrived in Wisdom with their entry.

It was the first time either one of them had been in the town.

"You're just in time," an official of the fair told them. "The livestock judging begins tomorrow. Yes, we have a pen for your entry."

By the flickering light of a lantern the two Triple-K punchers regarded their protégé with pardonable pride. Blue Lightnin' really did look fine. He was enormous, with a mighty head and astonishing ears. Stretched out in the pen, his sharply ridged back was pretty well hidden. His glorious blue-black bristles gleamed. It was the color of his bristles, coupled with his ability to split the wind through thickets and brush clumps, that had given him his name.

Benchleg saw to it that the brute was well supplied with doctored corn.

Then he and Hangfoot strolled off to see the sights.

They stopped a portly individual resplendent in blue cloth and brass buttons.

"Pardner, where's the best place to get a drink?" Hangfoot asked.

The town marshal regarded them coldly with, "You'll get no drink in this town," he informed them. "We got local option here."

"Good gosh!" wailed Hangfoot. "That's scand'lous. C'mon, Benchleg, I'm goin' home!"

Benchleg, however, had intercepted a wink from a seedy-looking gentleman standing behind the marshal. The two Triple-K waddies did not lack for any sort of liquid refreshment that night.

MORNING found them headed for Blue Lightnin's pen. There seemed to be considerable activity in the neighborhood.

"Say," barked Benchleg, quickening his step, "ain't that Hank Hooley from the Lazy-B?"

"It ain't nobody else," said Hangfoot, squinting at a gangling figure draped over Blue Lightnin's pen.

"And there's Ornery Orback and Bignose Burley."

Hooley suddenly swung a long leg into the pen. "It's a fake!" he bawled. "This ain't no hawg! It's a —"

Wham!

Hooley yelped as Hangfoot's bullet screeched past his head. Ornery Orback reached for his gun and Benchleg shot it out of his hand. Hangfoot's second bullet blew Bignose Burley's hat from his head. His third creased Hank Hooley.

That was enough for the Lazy-B outfit. They went away from there. A moment later the town marshal galloped up.

"What's goin' on here?" he bawled. "We don't allow no gunplay in this town!"

"Rustlers," explained Benchleg. "They tried to wideloop our hawg. They knowed he was gonna win first prize."

Benchleg's words were a prophecy. Late that afternoon a broad ribbon glittering with gold lettering fluttered from Blue Lightnin's pen. Blue Lightnin', sleeping the sleep of the thoroughly drunk, took no notice of it.

That night the Triple-K punchers celebrated their victory over the hated Lazy-B. Other persons of doubtful morals but boundless enthusiasm helped them make the occasion a success. Came the dawn, and with it came Hangfoot and Benchleg to their boarding-house and badly needed rest. They slept until mid-afternoon.

Benchleg awoke with a headache and a feeling that matters were not as they should be. A glance at the sun told him that the day was far advanced. It also told him other things.

"Hangfoot," he bawled, "roll your carcass outa that!"

"Lemme alone!" mumbled Hangfoot. "I craves slumber!"

Benchleg didn't argue. He emptied half the contents of the water pitcher over his partner. Hangfoot sat up, spouting water and cuss words.

"Shut up and come on," Benchleg told him. "All hell's to pay and no pitch hot!"

They hurried to the fair grounds, faces anxious.

"Oh, good gosh!" groaned Hangfoot. "Hear that? He's sober!"

"Sounds like he's got a headache, too!" panted Benchleg, starting to run.

A hurricane of angry squeals was coming from Blue Lightnin's pen. A crash sounded.

"Sufferin' sandtoads!" gulped Benchleg. "There he goes!"

A long blue shape soared from the pen. It lit with a grunt and a squeal and it lit running!

"Oh, good goshamighty!" groaned Hangfoot.

Squealing like a steam calliope, Blue Lightnin' shot between the pens. A band was blaring, "Hail the Conquering Hero Comes!" The leader must have been inspired.

"Ringtailed rattlesnakes!" gasped Benchleg. "He went plumb through the bass drum!"

In the speaker's stand nearby, a dignified fat man was making a speech.

"It is our proud boast," he bellowed, "that solidly we stand —"

Cr-r-r-rash!

Blue Lightnin' hit the speakers' stand head-on. There was a moment of wildly waving flags, splintering chairs and snapping posts. The orator vanished amid the wreck.

"He ain't standin' now!" moaned Hangfoot. "Benchleg, that fat jigger's the mayor! We ain't never gonna get outa jail!"

Blue Lightnin' veered.

A commanding figure in brass buttons and blue cloth loomed in his path.

"The marshal's gonna stop him!" shouted Benchleg.

There was a dust-smeared flurry of blue arms, blue legs and blue pig. Then the rampaging razorback roared on. He tried to turn a corner; his hoofs slipped on the gravel and he skidded sideways into a big red-

striped tent. "There goes the lunch counter!" squalled Hangfoot.

Curses, yells and the crash of breaking dishes arose. The center pole of the tent snapped. The whole outfit collapsed in red ruin. From under the flapping canvas rolled jugs and bottles.

The marshal took one look and reached for his gun.

Benchleg and Hangfoot did not see him reach. They suddenly yearned with a great yearning to be elsewhere. A wild swaying of bushes along the river bank showed where Blue Lightnin' shook the dust of the town from his hoofs and spurned the haunts of men.

"He's headed for the Black Hills and he'll be there blamed quick!" Benchleg panted. "I sure wish to gosh we was there!"

"Hightail for our room an' lay low till dark!" Hangfoot urged. "Then we'll try to sneak the buckboard and trail our rope."

"Whatcha suppose they'll do to us if they catch us?" Benchleg voiced his wonder.

"Penitentiary, sure!" gulped Hangfoot. "Mebbe they'll lynch us! Cowboy, our sins has sure found us out!"

"What's worryin' me," moaned Benchleg, "is that the law will find us in!"

DARKNESS came at last. The shivering punchers tiptoed down the hall, took a deep breath and stepped boldly into the street. Heavy hands fell on their shoulders. A voice boomed triumph.

"Been lookin' for you everywhere!" roared the marshal. "Just found out where you was stayin'. The mayor wants to see you."

"Sheriff," Hangfoot began desperately, "we didn't figger on —"

"I know! I know!" the marshal interrupted. "The mayor'll take care of you. He'll never forget you!"

"Yeah, an' he'll never have to look for us for the next ten years!" sighed Benchleg to himself.

In the mayor's office were the members of the prize committee and other officials of the fair. The mayor looked dignified and very stern.

His piercing eyes were fixed on the cowboys.

"We took great pains," he said, "to have this fair conducted in a manner above reproach. We did not expect —"

"Judge," Hangfoot pleaded, "we didn't mean to —"

"It doesn't matter," interrupted the mayor, "it is what you did that counts."

Benchleg gulped despairingly. Hangfoot seemed to fold up and shrink.

"Yes," said the mayor, "when your escaping hog wrecked the lunch tent it revealed that, under pretense of dispensing food, certain individuals were really selling bootlegged whisky to the ungodly elements of the community.

"The marshal arrested them and confiscated their wares. We have you gentlemen to thank for this victory of law and order."

Hangfoot and Benchleg stared with sagging jaws.

"You did not capture your hog?" asked the mayor.

Hangfoot, still wordless, shook his head.

"Plunged into the river and drowned, no doubt," said the mayor, regretfully. "Gentlemen, we regret your loss and have decided that, along with the prize money, you be given this additional fifty dollars!"

And for once in their lives, no ready words came to the gaping Hangfoot and Benchleg, two model citizens.

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The SUDDEN DEPUTY

Lita Underwood wanted to take Jimmy Beck as a prisoner — but he captured her heart instead!

JIMMY BECK, lately of the Flying O, headed his gray stallion toward the one-street cowtown of Prairie Dog. His pulse thumped slowly and his blue eyes were a-squint under the weathered, curly-brimmed sombrero. His lips formed a thin determined slash above his square chin. He was going to give himself up to the law.

Five days spent skulking in foothills and back gulches had decided him. Jimmy felt no remorse for that bullet sunk in the hide of pock-faced, ne'er-do-well "Coyote" Anderson back in Range City. But a wanted man led a furtive, animal life on the out-trails, gnawed by loneliness and constant apprehension of capture. Whoever was sheriff of Prairie Dog would have heard Beck was in demand seventy-odd miles south. He was prepared to go back and stand trial for murder—if Coyote Anderson were dead. He feared Coyote was. His slug had

By LAWRENCE A. KEATING

taken the fellow in the chest.

Jimmy mulled it all over for the thousandth time. Sheriff Myers was certain to make an example of him. He was only twenty-four and the vision of penitentiary years stretching far over the hill of his life stabbed panic to Jimmy's heart.

But he kept the stallion trudging on. He was going to surrender.

Maybe his previous good record would help. Maybe he could manage some defense even though he had plunged for his Colt ahead of Anderson. The poker game in the Longhorn Saloon had been amiable enough until Coyote persisted in signaling Hank Timms the value of Jimmy's cards. What happened then happened fast. Fifty seconds saw Beck, a cloud of swirling alkali dust, down the road.

This town of Prairie Dog consisted of two lines of haggard-looking clapboard structures that faced a wide street. Jimmy slowed the stallion. He rubbed his chin smoothed of five days' stubble with a razor borrowed this morning from a line rider. The street lay deserted. Not a human being in sight and only one animal, a spent-looking mustang at a hitchrail some distance away.

Beck touched a spur to the belly of his horse. He half expected a sharp hail to raise his hands, but none came. His reddish brows crinkled as, throwing a look under the half-doors of the Standard Bar, he failed to find a single pair of boots. No one in the General Dry Goods & Hardware, either. In fact, the place was closed. So also was the big stable, lettered, "Feed, Horse & Vehicle Rent, Abe Green, Prop."

The lone saddle nag bowed ashamedly before a one-story brick-and-clay jail. Jimmy Beck swallowed in a vain attempt to moisten his throat gone suddenly arid as sand. He shoved his anthill hat back on his forehead, drew another deep breath, and steered Captain for the hitchrail.

As he swung down he noticed the mustang's rawhide reins still around its neck. The horse remained as though hitched out of pure unwillingness to move. Jimmy tied his stallion, reflecting that when next he forked it he would be a prisoner. Wearing manacles, probably. He started to duck under the pole between two posts—but halted. The mustang's saddle was smeared with blood. Very fresh blood, for it had not yet dried even in this roasting early afternoon sun.

Jimmy hitched his cloth pants, moved his cartridge belt for better comfort. He crossed the plank sidewalk to the jail door. His knock was sharp lest his keyed-up nerve suddenly evaporate. The impulse tugged at him to get back on Captain and leave—

Was he crazy, aiming to surrender when he could get away, get to Canada if he wanted?

HIS mind was made up and he stayed. But as he twisted a quirly with fingers that shook a little, Beck frowned at the blank oak door. Not a sound came from within.

The jail was as deserted as the town looked to be.

Then he heard a shout, followed swiftly by sharp pounding. Jimmy trudged around the corner of the jail to learn whence that noise came. He had his cigarette alight when he got to the rear of the hoosegow and saw a small corral where two persons were fighting a red bronc, trying to get the saddle on it.

"Sheriff around?"

The bronc's left forefoot stabbed out. It narrowly missed the flush-faced girl with yellow hair tossing about her temples and cheeks. She leaped from danger in the nick of time. But she clung with both hands to the headstall straps, her slim body straight, spurred heels dug into the dust while the white-eyed horse steadily hauled her as it backed. She was not heavy enough to hold the brute while a man vaguely seen

in choking swirls of dust got the saddle on.

The bronc humped queerly. Jimmy cried a warning—prompted by the fact that she was nice looking and a girl. She all but lost her grip as she turned with a start. The next instant he had wriggled between the bars. He grabbed one strap, gave the horse a cuff on the muzzle that shot its head up, and seized the other.

"Put 'er on now!" he yelled.

The girl staggered from an unintended blow of Jimmy's elbow. The fellow in the cloud of dust made some quick movements while the bronc, discovering himself flanked by juniper bars and held prisoner in front despite all the slashing of forefoot he could manage, began to calm.

"She's on!" The man jumped away. Jimmy Beck let go, watched a moment, and saw the bronc was now quite docile. He turned to the girl to find her dark, deep eyes fixed upon him. She was engaged in stuffing a plenitude of that gleaming yellow hair under a worn Stetson. Jimmy found her of considerably more interest to look at than any girl he could at the moment recall.

"Who are you?"

"Well, I've been ridin' for Burt Walters' Flyin' O. That's down near Range City. I came in to see if the sheriff—"

"Oh, don't be long-winded—we haven't a minute to waste!" She turned impatiently to the other man, who would be a few years less than thirty. He had gray eyes constantly on the move and a sharp chin and a dry, masklike expression. He was engaged in dusting himself off, though his blue shirt and threadbare pants looked scarcely worth the bother. "Al, here's, help. We can trust anyone Burt Walters would hire. Dan knows Burt from years back."

She hurried through the corral gate. "Wait here. Have you a horse? Wait; I'll be right out."

He opened his mouth to speak but the girl broke into a light run toward a frame cottage next to the jail. Jimmy followed her with perplexed eyes until the rear door slammed. He shifted weight and looked back to the man. With a start he discovered a shiny, five-pointed star hooked through a loop of the fellow's cartridge belt.

"I—reckon you're a lawman, which is what I'm lookin' for. You see, Sheriff Myers down at Range—"

"Ain't a regular one." He moved out of the corral leading the bronc. Jimmy followed. "Jest sworn in special. Dan Underwood's sheriff here, if that's what you want. He's shot up pretty bad. The doc's with him and don't know if Dan is gonna live."

The cottage door banged, preventing more talk. It was the girl again, running toward them with a heavy black book. "Here," she panted, "you! Put your left hand on this Bible. Now raise your—right. No, no, just raise it with your palm flat. Like this." She seized his fingers and arranged them straight.

"But hold on, Lita, he—"

She ignored her companion. "Do you swear to uphold the law of Prairie County with all your ability and to the best of your understanding of said law? Do you swear in the sight of God and Al here, and me, to capture all malefactors and —well, lawbreakers, of course, and to do the right thing, and enforce peace with your six-gun if you have to? Well," she panted, "you know what I mean! Do you solemnly swear it?"

Jimmy stared. "But hold on, I ain't a fit one—"

"*Please* don't waste time! If we're going to capture this rascal we've got to hurry!"

"Huh? What rascal?"

She sighed with exasperation. "What on earth does it matter *what* rascal if there *is* a rascal to capture? But if you must know, the man who held up my brother, Sheriff Underwood, two hours ago. Not even

that long. Oh, maybe Dan will die —he's in the house. Doctor Sprague is doing all he can. But if we can capture this Jimmy Beck, Dan may recover. I mean, he is that way. He gasped out to Al Gowan here and me that the bullet wouldn't kill him as fast as shame might. His pride. Losing that county payroll, don't you see? There hasn't been a gun job here since—"

SHE left off, puzzled. The newcomer had retreated a pace. His amazed blue eyes traveled from the girl to the man called Al Gowan. Dumbfounded, he wet his lips, and again. "Y-you say J-Jimmy Beck?"

"Yes, Jimmy Beck! Dan told us the name—the man was so cocksure he was defiant, said the law would never grab him. But don't stand there like a post! Al and I are going after this killer and thief. You're going too. I don't know if it's legal, but it will just have to be; my deputizing you. Here, keep your hand on the Bible. You haven't answered yet. Do you swear faithfully and without reservation to uphold the law of Prairie County?"

His brain teemed with confused thoughts. He felt hot and cold by turns, felt a great sense of unreality. A holdup, a shooting of her brother Dan, sheriff here. Some fellow calling himself Jimmy Beck—

He shrugged helplessly. Jimmy was common, of course, and Beck wasn't unheard of. Was there in this vicinity another man of his name?

"Swear!" insisted Lita Underwood.

Jimmy cleared his throat. The blue of his eyes took on a frosty tinge and his square jaw jutted out. "I sure do swear, Miss."

"Right!" With a snap she placed the Bible on a convenient empty box. To Jimmy's surprise she stepped close to him and worked with quick, deft fingers at the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. He strove to organize all this into something sensible, but he was unable to concentrate because he was keenly and appreciatively aware of her nearness. Of the girl's turned-up nose with a half dozen freckles peppered there, and the long glossy lashes and dark brows that were pleasant contrast with her yellow hair, and the moist, red, bowed lips.

"There. What did you say your name is?"

He had prepared for that. "Call me Earl Keller."

"Where's your horse?"

"Out front. Reckon he'll do."

"Al"—to Gowan—"take him to the jail office. Get him a carbine and ammunition. I'll meet you in front. I want to tell Dan we've found another man and we are starting."

Lita Underwood caught up the black family Bible and again ran for the cottage. Gowan jerked his head at Earl Keller. Without a word he led the way into the jail by a side door, and to the office which Jimmy saw at once was the headquarters of the local sheriff.

"Say, just what's this all about? Things sure happen fast around here!" Automatically Beck accepted a carbine, examined it, and took the box of shells extended. Gowan seemed a queer fish, silent, his face a mask as though he had no emotions. Jimmy was not at all drawn to him. And he had a hunch that Al Gowan felt no particular joy at his coming.

"Why, just like Lita said. The county's buildin' an irrigation dam —"

"That's where everyone is, eh? Town's sure deserted."

"Folks went out to watch the sluice gate put in. Sort of holiday. We've had hard times and every able-bodied man's workin' except the cowhands that still got jobs."

"That includes you?"

"Not exactly," the fellow drawled in a chill tone. "I run six thousand head on my A G Box." After a steady look he moved to the street door, picked up several letters and papers someone had tucked under it,

and tossed them on the desk. "Yesterday's mail for Dan."

Jimmy felt sudden interest in that mail. He edged toward it. "You were sayin' about a payroll?"

"Dan got it from the county treasurer and he was ridin' for the place on Blue Creek where the dam's going up. A feller plugged him in the shoulder, knocked him off his horse. Before Dan could get his gun the feller had the payroll. Out of cussedness that mangy cur shot him again in the stomach. Said he was Beck from Range City and plenty tough. Somehow or other Dan managed to get back home alive. But he'll die, I reckon."

The wanted man had his back to the desk. "And you happened to be with Lita when her brother came in?"

"Me and Lita are fixin' to get married."

Beck showed his surprise. But he made no comment, delaying as the other stepped to the door at the side. "I'll fetch my horse."

It gave Jimmy his chance. The second letter, his alert eyes had seen, bore a Range City postmark. In the upper left corner of the envelope was the legend, "G. R. Myers, Sheriff of Boone County." Jimmy snatched it, stuffed it in his trousers pocket, then casually sauntered after Gowan. Undoubtedly that letter was to inform Sheriff Underwood that James Beck was wanted for the shooting of Coyote Anderson—

LITA appeared on the bronc that had been hard to saddle. It was a little spooky yet but manageable. While Jimmy ducked under the hitchrail for his Captain, Al Gowan appeared mounted.

"We better head for the place he was shot," the rancher proposed as they started at a lope down the deserted street toward the rugged mountains several miles west.

"You say it's about two hours since your brother got hit? Then it isn't likely Beck is still there. Maybe we could strike south a ways and cut into the foothills. If we cross Blue Creek we might pick up his trail." Jimmy watched their faces. "He wouldn't hang around much—he'd make tracks right off."

"Lose him that way. Our best chance—"

"Al, I'm inclined to think Mr. Keller is right." Lita wore a thoughtful look. "Yes, it would just be another waste of time. Let's head southwest. We'll surely cross his trail. He won't go north because it's open country. Hiding will be better if he stays in the hills." She spurred her bronc faster, forcing the men to follow suit.

Gowan opened his mouth to object, but closed it again. The girl could not hear him anyhow, from her lead position. Jimmy Beck, watching slyly, saw the plan adopted by a two-thirds vote did not suit the A C Box owner. But Gowan kept silent.

Prairie Dog was left behind. They rode at a fast pace over the swelling rangeland toward the low purple hills. Fifteen minutes passed, half an hour. There was little opportunity for talk and everything of importance appeared to have been said. Watching Sheriff Underwood's sister, Jimmy revised his estimate of her—upward. She was genuinely nice to look at. A girl had character, he reflected, to be so cool and calm on the trail of a would-be killer when her nearest relative lay at death's door and undoubtedly she longed to stay at his side until the crisis passed.

Their route lay through a cut hemmed in by juniper and boxwood and purple-edged Colorado spruce. Beck recognized a landmark here and there for he had come this way not many hours back—although he had kept away from the trail proper lest he meet someone he did not wish to meet.

At last Lita Underwood drew rein. "Here's the creek. Now let's see if we can discover tracks. But probably he walked his horse through

the water, and wouldn't leave any tracks!"

Jimmy shook his head. "Don't think he did. The bed's too soft here. It would make hard walkin' for the horse. Anyhow, that gent wanted to put miles under him. A man that tells his name right out wouldn't hang around any. He'd get a long ways quick as his horse could travel."

As he spoke he swung to the ground and began carefully to inspect the bank of the humming mountain stream whose pale color gave it its name. Lita and Gowan walked up and down on the same errand but reported no success. Jimmy forked the stallion again and urged it through the rushing cold water. The others came after and resumed their search.

"Funny. You'd think he'd come along here. But there isn't a sign of fresh tracks." The wanted man scratched his cheek reflectively. Gowan remained silent as ever, his dark pointed face a mask of his real feelings. Lita looked worried and impatient. She kept touching the big, heavy Colt .45 that swung on the thigh of her dark divided skirt, fingering the rubber butt of the gun while her troubled eyes sought to penetrate the stand of trees.

"It will be dark soon. Then we will have lost him for certain, Al. What shall we do now?" she questioned. "We can't let that man escape! Why, it would almost bankrupt the county, to say nothing of killing Dan. Times have been so hard—"

"Don't stir yourself up, Miss," Beck soothed. "We haven't played all our cards yet. There's always a chance."

"If there is, what do you suggest?" The rancher was frankly skeptical.

Jimmy looked him over coolly. For a chap engaged to Lita Underwood, he certainly was a cold proposition. Which struck Beck as odd. How could a fellow so lacking emotion win such a girl? She was the epitome of warm-heartedness; it was more than evident in the alert interest of her dark eyes and in her vivacious manner and movements whether she was a-saddle or afoot. They sure looked a strange pair. Must be Lita saw qualities in Al Gowan which a stranger could not see.

He stared down at the nickel star that sagged the pocket of his shirt. One hand went to his trousers pocket where the letter from Sheriff Myers of Range City reposed, which he had purloined for safety. Somehow that star and letter gave him a sense of responsibility—or was it smoldering wrath at the fact that the holdup had passed out his name, Jimmy Beck?

Or, watching Lita, was it a sort of inspiration that made him yearn to get his hands on the payroll-grabber?

He turned decisively and climbed astride Captain. "There's no chance of him followin' close to the creek now. We're sure of that. Let's strike higher in the hills on the hope we cross his trail. Like you say—er, Lita—we've got to get some clue before it's dark. After that we might as well call it off and go home. Let's mosey west. Good as anything, ain't it?"

GOWAN looked as though he wanted to object but had no persuasive reason. After momentary hesitation Lita assented. She rode after Jimmy who broke the trail among the thick fir trees. The mask-faced rancher brought up the rear—seemed to like that position.

It was growing dark in the timber section. The sun was a reddening disk high at the bare peaks of the mountains, its heat gone and its light dimming. They would have to get on the trail of the outlaw before another half hour passed or he had made good his challenge and getaway.

Suddenly Beck raised a hand in warning. His stallion stood stock still until Lita edged her bronc beside him. Gowan, to deepen the riddle of his queerness, began to hum a range song. A sharp gesture

stopped him.

"What's the idea? Nobody there," Gowan objected.

Jimmy looked at the girl, then to the tumbled log shack ahead. It stood at a tipsy angle, leaning downhill. Stumps of pine dotted the clearing. No light came from the gloomy-looking structure, nor was there any sign of a horse. Beck was afoot and touching at the sleeve of Lita's blouse. She dismounted.

"These branches are fresh broken. Here's a couple of hoof-marks. I noticed somebody broke off a good-sized branch back a few yards, and the way it was done pointed right here." His eyes glowed with hope. "Lita, it may be our man came along just a while ago!"

She stared in a long semicircle. Gowan's grunt of disbelief made them both start.

"Might have busted that branch early this mornin'. No use gettin' feverish to grab the ambush feller, Lita, whenever you hear a fairy story that sounds like it's right out of some book. What reason have we got—"

"Ssh! Not so loud, Al," she begged.

Jimmy felt the red creep up his neck. "Mebbe I am talkin' crazy. But when you're after a holdup and have no more to go on than we've had, an old line shack will bear lookin' at."

He did not try to conceal his resentment. The fellow had made no suggestions of his own that were any help, but he seemed plenty glad to throw sneers at whatever was said, thinly hopeful though it might be.

"I'll slip over on the far side," Beck continued. "I'll leave my carbine here; rather use my Colt. Lita, you better stay with the horses. Watch that busted pine. You'll be able to see me wave. Gowan can close in on one side while I come from the other."

"Close in on an empty line shack? Be awful cautious, Mister Keller. We don't want you shot up."

Jimmy felt cheap. He hurled a look at the man, then left them. Circling the cleared space, he soon arrived at the point he had named. With a bandanna he waved until he was sure they had seen, even in the dusky half-light. Gun in hand, Jimmy stalked forward, his course directed at a long side wall of the rickety cabin.

Not that he really expected anything to happen when he did look into the place. But he hoped against hope something would. Lita was growing more apprehensive every moment, and he wanted some sort of action, even if feigned, to distract her. Worry about her brother had begun to make the girl wish she had stayed back in Prairie Dog. Jimmy saw that; he had watched with keen interest. This foolish wild goose chase had to have some semblance of importance or Lita Underwood would feel she could never forgive herself for having left Dan's bedside while he lay hurt, perhaps in a dying condition.

Jimmy was close to the cabin. Its sides had lost some of their clay chinking and one big log had worked loose at the pigeoned end. The place looked as though it had not seen a human for several years.

A window-opening gave him the chance to peer in. He heard no movement, saw nothing. Jimmy decided to enter and light matches for a better look around. He lifted a foot, thrust it over the sill, and a moment later dropped within. He brought out a match and drew it along his thigh. The crimson flame lifted—

"Reach, you—quick!"

It took him wholly unawares. He had heard no step though he had listened for one. With a curse Beck whipped away his match and fired.

The roar of another gun preceded his by a fraction of a second. Something pierced his side like the stab of a glowing poker. It staggered him, whirled him around. He crashed against the wall of the cabin and felt

the cool air of the very window he had entered.

JIMMY shot again—and a third time. Gathering his strength he dove at the window. It was low, and he plunged through it to land on the hard earth with a jar that brought new flashes of pain from his wound. But he was outside, full length on the ground, his brown fist still clutching his gun—

Lita Underwood's cry was followed by light running steps. "Al! Al, are you all right?"

There was a growl and a curse. "Listen," the man snapped rapidly, "it was just like I figgered all along. But I wasn't sure till now. Lita, that hombre's crooked. I knew it when he wanted to come in here. The low-down skunk tried to kill me, that's what!

"But I was ready for him. Lita, he's gone—your friend Earl Keller. Alias Jimmy Beck—and it's him; I'll bet anything it's Beck himself, for I saw him steal a letter from Sheriff Myers to your brother Dan, back in the jail office!"

They came outside. Jimmy lay motionless, his ears straining while he gathered his strength. His fingers roving to the source of the pain in his side came away damp and sticky. The bullet must have scraped his ribs.

Footsteps came nearer. Swiftly he snaked to a protective clump of dogberry bushes. He crouched in their black shadow and watched as Al Gowan, six-gun alert, strode past. Lita followed, tremulous with excitement. At the corner of the line shack Gowan halted.

"He got away, curse him! Listen, he's our man. There ain't a doubt about it. Else why did he steal Myers' letter to Dan? But he's wanted, that's what. The talk about Burt Walters' Flyin' O was smooth but I hunched from his face while he said it there was somethin' rotten. Didn't let on 'cause you seemed to like him. I bet he's Jimmy Beck that shot Dan!"

"Then he must have the payroll, Al! But why did he come to town?"

"Don't know. Mebbe to make sure Dan was dead. The lobo! Lita, we've got to grab that feller, honey. But we need more men to comb these woods right. Listen: we ain't more'n a mile from the dam. You get your horse and fog there. Bring back six or eight men—all you can. I'll stay here and hunt. I plugged him, so mebbe he didn't get far. Come on, Lita," he finished urgently.

They hurried around the line shack corner and were gone.

Jimmy rose. His side ached and for a moment he battled gray dizziness. But there was no time to be lost. He plunged toward a trail they had crossed which must lead to the irrigation dam. If he failed to encounter the girl it was all off—

Reaching the trail, he clasped a pine trunk to steady himself. After a moment hoofbeats reached him and he prepared. When a dark form loomed several yards away Jimmy lurched out. He grabbed the bronc's near rein with such swiftness that it reared up with a frightened whinny. Beck's other hand shot for the raising hand of the girl. His hard fingers closed over her wrist and he gave a sudden jerk.

She gave a cry of pain. Her gun fell. The next instant Lita Underwood toppled into his arms.

The nearness of her sent a thrill through him. Her Stetson was thrust back and the softness of the yellow hair brushing his cheek, the frightened struggle of Sheriff Underwood's sister, prompted him to clutch her harder while he sought to cover her lips with one palm.

"Lita, Lita! You got to keep quiet while I do some talkin'. Listen, I'm no holdup. Honest, I didn't stop your brother and take that money!" He left off to grab her more firmly. She was on her feet now and struggling angrily to wrench away. But he kept his hand over her lips and despite the electric twinges from

his wounded side, bent her back out of muscular control.

"Give me a chance—you got to! I'm Jimmy Beck, sure. But I never stole a nickel, I tell you! I—" He choked. "I shot a man over to Range City five days ago. Coyote Anderson it was, over a poker game. Been hidin' out since. I rode into Prairie Dog to give myself up and be taken back to Range City. But you made a mistake and—"

He stopped. Worn out, she ceased struggling and lay a limp, slender figure of femininity in his arms. Jimmy released her. With a quick motion he scooped her gun off the ground. He pressed it butt-first into her cold hand, then stepped quickly away.

"We're going back to the cabin. I got a mighty strong hunch something'll happen there, soon. Go on—poke that thing at me! It won't make any difference. You won't shoot. You *can't*. Come along and we'll find out if I'm right. If I'm not, then I swear I'll go back to town with you peaceable!"

It was a queer method of persuasion, to hand the girl her own Colt which he had but a moment since wrenched from her grasp. Lita Underwood could not puzzle it out swiftly enough. She was panting and dazed and confused. But while she held the six-gun muzzle against his stomach, with her forefinger crooked around the trigger, he talked on. Imploringly. Urgently. And he was cool, not the least fearful.

IT HAD a strange effect. Finally she lowered the gun. "I—I can't understand it!" She leaned quite near to search his face in the deep shadow.

Jimmy felt they dared spend no more time here. "You got my promise. Now come on back. Leave your horse—we'll get him later. Be quiet. Don't make a sound or talk!"

Wholly ignoring the threat of her .45 he followed his words by turning away. Lita Underwood caught her breath. She raised the weapon again—but did not shoot. She could not shoot a man in the back. It was confused determination to keep the drop on him that made her follow.

They covered fifty or more yards before Beck turned off the trail. He picked his way among the trees to approach the line shack from the window side he had approached before. All unexpectedly he jerked back, his sharp heel on the toe of her boot.

"There's a light!"

They scarcely breathed. Inside the cabin a light did flicker, a candle. Jimmy turned very slowly to put his face near the face of the girl.

"Keep behind me."

Crouching, he moved silent as a wraith to the window. He had forgotten his wound save that he was vaguely conscious of moisture trickling down his side. Under the window Jimmy paused. His hand slid along the girl's arm to find her shoulder. He forced her to crouch yet lower. Then he raised to a standing position.

The scene that met his gaze included two men. One was seated at the rickety slab table near the fireplace. He had a canvas sack at his elbow and he was engaged in sorting its contents, silver and paper bills, into two piles on the table. The second man, Al Gowan, held the candle in his left hand, his right at the thigh clasping a Colt.

Gowan's back was turned. He whirled as if on a pivot. *Wham! Crash!* Fire tongued from the six-guns to leave in its wake little puffs of acrid gray smoke.

Gowan staggered clutching his hip. His gun clattered across the table and fell out of reach. His spur caught on the hard plank floor and he sprawled heavily on his back.

"Don't move!" Jimmy yelled to the fellow with the cash.

He obeyed. But the glittering black eyes showed how he longed to

slide one hand off the slabs to his holster. Jimmy kept the drop on both men while over his shoulder he ordered Lita around to the door. She entered, pale, her red lips quivering. But she was game! She picked up the candle which had kept alive as it toppled, and fixed it on the hewn shelf of the fireplace. She scooped up Gowan's .45, then disarmed the second man as at Beck's crisp order he slid his stool back and rose with palms ear-high.

Jimmy hurried to the door and entered. He strode straight for the second hombre. His lips curled in contempt and a sneer of triumph. He couldn't resist gloating. This little act was going to mean a powerful lot to him.

"Lita, these two piles of cash tell plenty. Your friend Gowan and Coyote Anderson here fixed it up to rob your brother. Coyote did the actual job, not a doubt of it. He's that kind."

He looked the fellow up and down. "Thought I'd killed you, Coyote. Too bad in a way I didn't. Where'd you get it?"

"In the chest," the fellow growled.

Jimmy swung a thigh on the table. With narrowed eyes he kept Anderson covered while Al Gowan crawled cursing to his knees, then to his feet.

"I'm Beck, Lita, like I told you. I been ridin' for Burt Walters' Flyin' O over near Range City. Had a card game in the saloon that ended with a shootin'. I left town sudden because I thought I'd killed Coyote. Sheriff Myers would sure make an example of me I figured, 'cause he'd been tellin' around what he'd do to the next pair that swung their guns too fast. Coyote must have rustled from town pretty quick after I did.

"I hid out since last Saturday. Finally I made up my mind to give up. Prairie Dog was nearest and I rode in lookin' for a lawman to surrender to. You kind of took me off my feet when you pinned on this star."

He shrugged, grinning, though his face was gray, and colored specks danced before his eyes. "Coyote told your brother at the holdup he was Jimmy Beck. He knew I've been dodgin' the law, apparently. Thought it was a good one to pin this job on me."

Lita watched his face with eyes that were deep and glowing.

"Let's start back," Jimmy proposed in an uncertain voice. "I don't feel so good."

"You can't arrest me!" Gowan blustered. "I'm as much a deputy sheriff as you are!"

Lita Underwood raised her Colt to bear on him. She was very pale but her dimpled chin was set and her look of cold contempt made the rancher flinch. "I'll take that star back, Al Gowan. I swore you in, so I can—well, guess I can swear you out, too! You're under arrest, both you men. And Jimmy Beck, I believe every word you say. Gowan is in danger of losing his ranch because he is a deadbeat and his creditors won't listen any longer. That gives his motive here. I—I think perhaps my brother will like having a new deputy. A permanent one, if you want the job."

Jimmy looked at her. He felt sick but happy, a queer combination. The illness was from his bullet wound. He grinned twistedly at the thought that an arrow in his heart made him happy. An invisible arrow from the bow of that fellow Cupid.

His lips parted—but then he decided not to say it. Doggone! What he thought was that if it lay within his power, Lita's brother was going to have something more than a new deputy sheriff. Dan Underwood was going to have a new relative just as soon as Jimmy could get that yellow-haired, dark-eyed girl to whisper "yes!"

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As they ride, both them codgers begins to whoop and holler, "To the hills! The dam is busted!"

TOO MANY HEROES

By RAY NAFZIGER

The Hooker Brothers and One-Ton run into some "dam" trouble that makes the Johnstown Flood seem like a leaky water tap!

WELL, as long as they have fires at sea and these here brave sailor lads to advise passengers to jump overboard so as to have plenty room for the sailors in the boats, we'll allus have arguments which it is better to be—a live coward or a dead hero.

Here on Canyon Lobo cow ranch, which is run by me, Johnny Hooker, and my li'l brother Stevie, and our three so-called cowhands—"One-Ton" Benson, old George and Pablo—we learnt when it comes to this town of Canyon Wells you don't git no credit in neither case.

Since the heroic actions we done over in that place, the Canyon Wells

people has offered a head bounty on live or dead cowboys. Which only goes to show what gratitood is in our country.

It all starts when I hear that Old Man Barlow, owner of the Three B, is rounding up over in the Big Lake country above Canyon Wells. Right away, me, as general manager and supervisor of this ranch, alert to all details, I sees we got to have some reps over with that wagon to pick up our stray cattle. And to see that the work is done right, I decide me and our big waddy, One-Ton Benson, will ride over for that roundup to see that no ranikaboo is run on us.

That's what I announce at supper, and my li'l brother Stevie he at once hits the roof and raises it a few feet.

"Over my dead body you'll go on that roundup!" he erupts out, like old Faithful Guyser. "Over my dead body, you hear me, hey? All you and One-Ton figgers is to spend a week sittin' and fishin' at Big Lake. We ain't got more'n three or four head o' cows over in that country, and Old Man Barlow, while he's grouchy, he's honest and allus brings back our stuff. Forgit it, you loafer!"

THAT'S my li'l coot of a brother Stevie for you—no more co-operation than there is between a hungry rattlesnake and a fat gopher. He's got the broad mind of a cow tick and the far-seein' vision of a Carlsbad Cavern bat. Allus suspectin' me and One-Ton is tryin' to slack on the job when, as everybody knows, they ain't a harder-workin' pair of cowboys nowhere.

"You hear me?" the irritatin' li'l peanut continues to bellyache. "You ain't goin'! If you have a cravin' for fish, open yourself a can of pink salmon."

"Let 'em go, Stevie," advises our cook and general flunky, George. "From what I heard happened last year in the Big Lake country, them two will git mixed in enough trouble, either with them folks at Canyon Wells or with Old Man Barlow, to come home here yelpin'."

"What possible trouble could two sech peaceful fellers as me and One-Ton git into with anybody?" I says. "All we're doin' is goin' over to help on a roundup."

"Yes, and you two boys could be goin' to help St. Peter and his angels round up a bunch of harps and wings, and all the branded folks in Heaven would be howlin' to be sent down to the mavericks in the other place," says old George. "That's my opinyun."

"And who ast it, hey?" bawls One-Ton, who is the most peaceful feller you could imagine, unless you ride him too hard.

"Calm down, all of yuh," orders my li'l brother Stevie. "We'll jist forgit this here roundup that Johnny and One-Ton ain't goin' on. They're due to dig postholes along that drift fence tomorrer, and if they go on a fishin' trip it'll only be over my dead body."

"Says you," I says, only to myself.

As while I could argy it out or give Stevie a sock in the jaw, what is the use? My motto is to dodge trouble. And so in follerin' out that motto, that night while my li'l brother and old George and Pablo is snoozin', me and One-Ton gits up and takes a extra shirt and some socks and goes down to pick up the saddle horses we tied out in the brush.

Loadin' up our bedrolls on a busted-down cow pony, we lights out to ketch the Three-B wagon which I heard moved out the day before, headin' toward Big Lake.

Me and One-Ton bein' about the best cowhands in the country, we know that Old Man Barlow, what is short o' riders, will be tickled to death to have us join him. At least you would think so, but if you did, you sure would of missed it a mile.

We never saw no such sour looks as we gits when we rides alongside the Three-B chuckwagon, on which is ridin' Old Man Barlow and his cook, "Fatty" Banners. The cow-

boys is off takin' the remuda up ahead over the mountain, while the wagon is goin' around.

"Where you think you two is goin', hey?" snaps Old Man Barlow. "I hope you ain't thinkin' you're joinin' our roundup at Big Lake."

"Nothin' else but," I says, knowin' he's kiddin'.

"If you do, it'll be over my dead body," growls Old Man Barlow, who has a mean reputation for bein' a sour-stomached feller. "Besides settin' a bad example as loafers, you busted up or demoralized too many roundups for me already."

"I think you has got the facts wrong there, Mr. Barlow," I says, het up at that charge. "How did we ever bust up or demoralize your roundups?"

"I ain't got time to name all the ways," said Barlow. "I only know as soon as you throw your bedrolls on my wagon, hell begins to pop."

"It shore does, Barlow," says that Fatty Banners cooky. "Them two is full o' such half-wit tricks as puttin' salt in the sugar sack, and visey versey."

"Last year," goes on Barlow, "you boys got all them folks down at Canyon Wells sore at us, by leadin' a bunch of my weak-minded waddies down and gittin' 'em to stick a wild cow up in the tower of the schoolhouse, so's the town almost to wreck the schoolhouse to git her down."

"I heard roomers of that trick which some rowdies pulled," I says, "but as we explained at the time, me and One-Ton didn't have a thing to do with it. Everybody knows me and One-Ton is too dignified and high-minded to be mixed up in a cheap college raw-raw trick like that."

"And anyway," puts in One-Ton, "if we did do it, we was stewed at the time. And with the kinda likker they sold us down in Canyon Wells that night they oughta be thankful we didn't h'ist a coupla elephants up in that schoolhouse 'stead of a li'l runty cow."

"All I got to say is," says Old Man Barlow, "they ain't no room round my chuckwagon for you boys. And that's final!"

WELL, that would of made any two cowboys in the West sizzlin' mad, but not me and One-Ton, what you'd ride one long ways to find a more good-natured pair.

Old Man Barlow allus camps in the canyon a hundred yards or so down from the big dam at the lower end of Big Lake, which ain't no lake, only a big irrigation reservoir, and me and One-Ton decides until Barlow is over his peeve, we will camp by the canyon just under the dam.

When he changes his mind, we will be handy to ride out with his cowboys, and meanwhile we will do some fishin'. There's nice shade all along the bank of Big Lake where you can set while you pull 'em in.

After we has camped, along comes the Three-B wagon to camp as per usual downcanyon aways.

Account the cloudbursts in the country, the lake is way higher than usual, and there is a bunch of them galoots from the burg of Canyon Wells up at the dam and lookin' at it and shakin' their heads. The dam there is mighty old and them people is worried that, with all that water behind it, the pressure may take it out.

If it does, there'll be a wall o' water washin' down the canyon ten miles to the town, all same as the Johnstown flood and mebbe wipin' out the place.

There's a engineer that comes up and he says that the dam is strong as the Rock of Gibraltar and there's nothin' to be afraid of. But them geezers from Canyon Wells, they shakes their heads and they 'low they're goin' to be on the lookout down below for the first sign of a break. And meanwhile, they'll move the women and children outa the low part o' the town to houses back of the slope. Also they got a alarm in the town, to warn of danger if anything busts.

They prepare to go back home down the canyon, when one o' them, the postmaster, Bib Matthews, sees me and One-Ton.

"I hope you boys," he says, "ain't figgerin' on visitin' our town."

You'd think mebbe it would make us sore to have men like Old Man Barlow and this Bib Matthews throwin' cracks our way, but me and One-Ton ain't that kind.

"All right," I says, "if we ain't wanted down in that one-horse, lop-eared town of yours, we kin take a hint."

"I wouldn't hardly go so far as to say yuh ain't wanted, Johnny," that Bib Matthews tells us, "but if yuh can't take a hint, we'll take some scatter-guns loaded with bird-shot and jist natcherally run yuh out."

WHICH, of course, is only a joke of Bib's, as me and One-Ton is poplar wherever we go.

"There ain't no danger," says the engineer, as he prepares to go also. "That dam will be there when Pike's Peak is wore away to a hole. But," he says, winkin' at me and One-Ton and Old Man Barlow, "the first sign o' warnin' of a bust would come if a crack appeared anywhere in the face of the dam with water seepin' out.

"Even a crack a foot long means the dam is goin' to bust," he went on, "and if you cowboys happen to see such a crack open in this dam, kill your horse gittin' down to warn the town."

"Shore," says Barlow, takin' the engineer plumb serious. "We'll do that."

Old Man Barlow and the cook returns to their roundup wagon, and them citizens and the engineer goes back down to Canyon Wells, while me and One-Ton ketches us a mess of fish. Then, not havin' no camp equipment, we go down to the Three-B wagon and we borry us some flour and a Dutch oven or two and a skillet, and some sugar and bakin' powder and salt and coffee, etc.

FATTY BANNERS, that sour cook down there, bellyaches around and asks sarcastic why don't we borry the whole chuckwagon and be done with it, and to please git the devil out o' his camp before him and Old Man Barlow brains us with a neck-yoke.

We goes back and cooks us dinner and eats it, and then it bein' kinda hot, sets in the shade and smokes.

"It's a good thing we ain't ones to hold a spite," says One-Ton. "If we was, we'd be thinkin' of some way to git even with Old Man Barlow and them Canyon Wells citizens, although of course even we did think of it, we wouldn't spring it on 'em."

"Nope," I agrees to this. "We ain't like some fellers what would be settin' here now thinkin' up some trick to get back at that Barlow and them Canyon Wells fellers."

"I should say not," says One-Ton. "But if you was that kinda revengeful feller, Johnny, how would you figger a way to get back at them Gila monsters?"

"One-Ton," I tells him, kinda severe, "I'm such a good-natured fella, I couldn't even set here and think up a way of gittin' even with them birds."

Which talk I jist repeats to show that we couldn't possibly of done what some folks afterward says we done.

We sets there in the shade talkin'. Below us Old Man Barlow, who doesn't ride out much any more, and his cook sets in the shade of the wagon swoppin' lies, proba'ly. Their cowboys is all out makin' a late circle.

"That guy said if we saw a crack here, to ride down and warn the town," I says to One-Ton. "I wonder what would happen if trouble did come while our two horses was grazin' out from our camp, and nothin' but our old pack pony here. I guess Old Man Barlow and Fatty Banners would have to carry the warning on them two nags tied to their roundup wagon."

"Yes, I guess they would," says One-Ton.

Which is all we said on the subject, and it ought to be enough to show that what Old Man Barlow claims we lay up there plannin' out what happened is a lie.

We has a snooze and then I saddle up our pack horse, decidin' to go out and bring our saddled horses in. On the way down, I stop in roundup camp where Barlow and his cook is still settin'.

"Where yuh headin'?" asks Barlow. "Why don't yuh git off and carry that poor old pony, Johnny?"

He snickers at that and Fatty Banners joins in.

From where we are we can just see the dam, the high front of it, over a hundred yards upcanyon. As I'm stoppin' there, we hear a yell and there is One-Ton what has climbed up to a shelf of rock along the canyon wall and he's pointin' down at the dam.

"What's he yellin'?" says Old Man Barlow. "That the dam's goin' out?"

When we look we git the shock of our lives. On that dam is a black streak anyway ten foot long, and the dam all round and below is wet with water.

"Goddlemighty," said Old Man Barlow. "The dam's got a crack in it! A big one! She's goin' to bust!"

Fatty and Barlow they look up at the canyon wall and figgers that flood'll wash 'em away like flies. Their only chance is to git down a half a mile or so where they can climb out the canyon quick. They make a break for that team o' horses and leap on bareback.

"Do you think it's dangerous?" I inquires.

"Dangerous?" chatters Old Man Barlow. "Dangerous, yuh half-wit? There'll be a wall o' water fifty foot high washin' over this spot inside of a few seconds, proba'ly. If we don't ride down this canyon, we're blowed-up horntoads!"

And they starts off, kickin' their workhorses in the ribs and ridin' for life down the canyon.

I start follerin' along behind, my pack horse lopin'.

"Sink in yore spurs, Johnny!" this Barlow yells at me. "Yuh got to ride down and warn Canyon Wells. That town will be plumb drowned out with all that lake o' water comin' down. We kin turn acrost the mesa and gain four miles on the flood."

Us three thunder outa the narrer part in the canyon and look behind agin. No sign of water, but it's at this time that we hear a sound behind us, a sorta boom.

"Goddlemighty! That's the dam goin' out!" hollers old Barlow. "We gotta ride as no men ever rode before. Ride, boys! We're all that stands between that ragin' flood and Canyon Wells. Kill yore horses and yourself, only save the town!"

Where the mesa starts, they turn aside to take the shortcut, savin' three or four miles of crooked canyon trail to the town, and still ridin' them nags like a coupla jockeys in the Derby. Funny? Say, it's the most comical sight that I seen in years.

That fat cook ain't been on a horse for ten years, and old Barlow ain't rode one off a trot for about the same time. They're pantin' and sweatin' and cussin' at havin' their insides shook up, but a pair of dead game heroes, ready to die to save lives.

When we drop into the canyon again, the two raises a yell. The flood ain't in sight yet, the canyon bottom bein' dry as a bone, an' they figgers they has won the race with Death.

RIGHT ahead of us is the town, and makin' a whirlwind finish they works on their plugs' ribs. With the nags neck and neck, an' me a few yards back, they thuds into Canyon Wells and down Main Street.

As they ride, both them codgers begins to whoop and holler, Old Man Barlow yellin' at the top of his voice:

"To the hills! The dam is busted! To the hills!"

Well, the nearest hills is fifteen miles off, but "To the Hills!" is what heroes what ride into town ahead of a flood is s'posed to shout. The houses of the town is built back out o' danger on the high slope from the stores on Main Street. It's the Main Street folks, storekeepers and sech, that'll be exterminated when that turrible wall of water pours down the canyon.

The town, what's been takin' a afternoon nap, begins to wake up at them yells. Bib Matthews, the postmaster, what warned me and One-Ton to stay outa town, he runs out. Grabbin' up a sledge-hammer that's layin' by a steel wagon tire hung to a tree branch, he gives it a whack.

Wham! *W-h-a-m!* That alarm sounds, and zowie, the town springs to life all the same as a feller gittin' up from where he sets down on a yeller jacket. Bib Matthews quits beatin' the alarm, and he runs back into the postoffice and races out again, carryin' two empty mailbags in one hand and in the other a li'l ounce scale used to weigh letters.

"Clear the way!" he orders. "I'm savin' government property!"

From the hotel the owner, Tom Fairgraves, comes out and he's luggin' a brass spittoon in one hand and a vase full of flowers in the other.

"Keep cool, men!" he bawls. "Dont' lose your heads." And he disappears with a cloud of dust trailing him.

The feller ownin' the hardware store begins pitchin' out rakes and hoes and shovels, and as he throws 'em out, he's bawling:

"Carry 'em away, somebody!"

The Canyon Wellsers they goes wild. They races around, not knowin' what to save. Some stares up the canyon lookin' for that wall of water. Some of 'em hops up and down, and some of 'em tears down the street with the volunteer fire department wagon. Other men is keepin' cool by runnin' back into their stores and out ag'in, like a bunch of loco ants.

That keeps up all of ten minutes, with them two heroes, Old Barlow and his cook, gallopin' up and down, still bawlin', "To the hills!"

With the excitement at its height, along comes that engineer what told the folks up at the dam there wasn't no danger.

"What's wrong?" he demands.

"Wrong?" bawls Barlow, settin' his work plug back on its haunches. "Yore dam's gone out, that's all! If not for me and my cook, the whole town would of been caught sort of unprepared when the water comes down."

"I don't see a drop o' water comin' down the canyon," says the engineer. "What makes you think the dam might be goin' out?"

"We don't think it might be goin' out. It's a'ready went!" snaps Old Barlow. "There was a crack in the dam, all of twenty foot long, where we could see the water was seepin' through. And as we got half a mile below the dam, we heard the boom of it collapsin'."

The engineer looks up the canyon and shakes his head. "If that dam went out like you said," he remarks, "the water would of been flowin' over this town long before you could of got down here on horseback. A train couldn't beat it down here. What did that crack look like when you examined it close?"

"We didn't examine it close, y' fool," snarls Barlow, mad. "We was about a hundred yards down the canyon when we heard a cowboy, One-Ton Benson, standin' up near the dam and he was yellin', 'The dam's goin' out! The dam's goin' out'!"

The engineer turns to me.

"So Johnny Hooker and his pal was in this, was they?" he says. "How about you, Johnny? Did you hear One-Ton yellin' that the dam was goin' out?"

"Well," I says, "to be frank, I didn't hear it that way. Instead of him yellin' that the dam was goin'

out, I thought he said that the ham was givin' out. We been kinda short on chuck."

"Look here, Johnny!" foams Barlow. "Yuh saw that crack in the dam with yore own eyes, didn't yuh?"

"I can't say I did," I returns. "I saw what a coupla old weak-eyed knotheads might of took for a crack. But I wouldn't be surprised but what it might jist been a streak of tar or paint on the wall of the dam."

"I begin to smell a mouse," says that Fatty Banners cook.

BARLOW, he opens his mouth wide, and then he shuts it ag'in and looks around at the crowd what's gathered. Then he shakes his fist in my direction.

"What I smell is a polecat under the barn," he says. "What did yuh ride along with us down here for, if yuh didn't think the dam was goin' out?"

"Who, me?" I says to that. "Why, I figgered I might as well come along for the ride."

At that, Old Man Barlow and Fatty Banners they glared at me, but they don't say nothin'. They're too mad, and for what reason? Why, them half-wits they actually think that me and One-Ton planned that fake dam-bustin' as a joke on 'em, paintin' a crack on the dam wall and splashin' water up on it. And they even figgers One-Ton musta let off a stick o' dynamite back there to make 'em think the wall busted.

Them two ain't the only ones mad. Them Canyon Wellsers is sure on the prod, figgerin' all three of us rigged up the trick to scare the town.

"We ought to tar and feather all them cowmen!" busts out Bib Matthews, the postmaster. "Comin' down here yellin' and scarin' us half to death!"

"Me," speaks up the hardware man what's throwed out about half his store into the street, "I'll pervide a barrel of tar, if somebody else will pervide the feathers."

Half a dozen speaks up at once to pervide feathers, and me and Barlow and Fatty Banners we edges our horses outa that crowd quick, headin' back up the canyon.

Barlow and Banners, they don't seem to care about my company, still seemin' to hold to the ridickilous idea I tried to lure 'em into that wild ride. When they git back to their wagon, they hooks up their horses and pulls out to camp somewhere else, jist as if they didn't want to risk bein' near me and One-Ton.

Me and One-Ton manages to eat a good supper in spite of our grief at all this misunderstandin'. We can't help it if people will insist on suspectin' us of playin' tricks which a pair o' kids would not stoop to.

We figger we need a rest anyway, and we will stay here a week or so, in spite of no roundup, as my bossy li'l brother Stevie will never know the difference. But just after it gits dark, who should ride up but that dang Stevie and old George!

"Over here on roundup, are you, hey?" says Stevie, as he gits down. "Jist like I thought, the lazy bums!"

"Hold on," I says, thinkin' fast. "We ain't on roundup, account we got us a job instead watchin' to see that this dam don't break. If we see a crack appear in the face of the dam wall, we got to burn the breeze ridin' down to warn the people in Canyon Wells."

"Sure, that's it," says One-Ton. "We're doin' it as a favor—riskin' our lives here right under the wall o' this dam."

"It sounds fishy to me," says Stevie. "How can you see a crack appear in the dam here in the dark?"

"We was jist gittin' ready to build up the fire," I states, "so it will light up the whole dam. Then me and One-Ton will take shifts on watchin' durin' the night."

They grunts skeptical, and bein' hungry sets down to finish what supper we left over. Me and One-Ton takes our horses and snakes down a lot of dead trees for the fire. Then we says we is ridin' up the lake a

ways to look at the outlet gates, and that Stevie and old George should watch the dam while we is gone.

Instead of ridin' off, just to try out a li'l experiment One-Ton and me retires to some brush right behind camp and hides there. The wood we piled on the fire pops loud and the flames they reach higher and higher, shinin' on more and more of the wall of that dam.

Stevie and old George has filled themselves with grub and is settin' with their backs to a log. Old George is rollin' him a cigarette, and lookin' kinda idle up at the dam on which the flames is now playin'. All asudden he lets out a yell.

"Goddlemighty!" he bawls just like Old Man Barlow done. "The dam, Stevie, lookit! A big crack!"

Stevie he sets up and stares hard. There, sure enough, is a black streak what in the firelight looks like a crack all right, and the wall around is still damp.

"A crack in the wall!" yells my li'l brother Stevie. "Twenty foot long. And wet on both sides of it! Hey, Johnny! Hey, One-Ton!" he bawls. "The dam is goin' out. Ride down and warn the town!"

ME AND One-Ton don't answer. We're s'posed to be way up the lake. If they want to think that black mark on the dam wall is a crack, that is their own lookout.

"Think of it, Stevie," says old George. "All them women and childrew below and them bums ain't here to take down a warnin'."

"Hey, Johnny!" they both yowls. "Hey, One-Ton!"

"Somethin's got to be done," says Stevie, when we don't answer. "We got to ride down in their place. They may not be back for a hour. Fork your horse, George. Both of us got to ride so's one will be left to go on if one of our horses falls."

So they leaps into their saddles and they spurs off, while me and One-Ton comes outa that thicket.

"Hustle, One-Ton," I says. "Step in your saddle. We got to see what happens when them heroes arrives and tell them Canyon Wellsers that there is a crack in the dam and that it's goin' out."

We ride down after Stevie and old George, who is sure splittin' the breeze fast, but me and One-Ton havin' a pair of fast ponies gains on 'em steady.

When they git to the mesa they turn off to take the shortcut to the town. We keep gainin on 'em until, when they head into the town which has already gone to bed, we ain't far behind. They makes a whirl-wind finish, ridin' in shootin' off the six-shooters they happen to carry, yellin' and hollerin' perzactly like Old Man Barlow and Fatty Banners.

"To the hills! To the hills!" they bellers as they races down Main Street, stoppin' at the end to gallop back. "The dam! The dam!" they yells. "It's a-goin' out! Git back to the hills!"

It's moonlight enough for Stevie to see that wagon-tire alarm signal in front of the postoffice, and he leaps down, to grab up the hammer.

Wham! He spanks that there steel ring. "To the hills!" bawls Stevie.

Not many people is sleepin' along where the stores is on Main Street, but one of 'em, Bib Matthews, who lives behind the postoffice, he opens a window.

"Some more cowboys playin' hero, is it?" he bellers. "And to the hills, is it? Git fer the hills yoreselfs! We figgered some more cowboys might be comin' down here, and we're fixed for yuh."

Then he sticks out a double-barreled shotgun, and it explodes.

My li'l brother Stevie, who's still spankin' that iron and yellin' "To the hills!" between whams, he suddenly straightens up and grabs for the rear of his britches.

"Ouch!" he bellers.

The other barrel goes off and old George's horse gits a load of rock salt along his rump and busts in two, makin' George grab for all the leath-

er there is on the saddle.

From the hotel across the way there booms another shotgun, where some other indignant citizens opens up. Stevie and old George rushes for cover. "What is the matter with you birds?" they yells back. "We're tryin' to save your lives!"

Me and One-Ton, we've rode along the bottom of the draw that runs right through town, and we're settin' there laughin' at all this, when we hear a swish. Lookin' down, we see water comin' right down the dry bottom of that draw, a few inches deep, and while we stares at it, surprised, it raises some more, comin' up to our horses' knees. "Gosh!" says One-Ton. "Do you reckon something has really happened to that dam?"

It keeps on raisin' about a inch a second, and me and One-Ton spurs our horses outa there.

"It means the dam is goin' out, or has went," I tells One-Ton. "We got to get these folks outa this."

Which sayin', I heads for the post-office and pulls up. "Bib," I calls. "The dam! She's breakin'."

"Shore, I know," hollers Bib, who's jist gone to bed ag'in. "And yuh want us to hike fer the hills, I s'pose. You pests ride outa here and let us sleep, before we put some real shot in our scatterguns."

"But it ain't no joke, Bib," I states, earnest. "There's water comin' down the canyon and raisin' fast. That dam must be goin' out gradual, but no tellin' when the whole lake will come pourin' down. We ain't foolin' this time. Come out and see the water for yourself."

"Go to blazes!" says Bib.

STEVE and old George, they lopes over, mad enough to fight me and One-Ton. But seein' that stream rushin' down the draw, they realizes also it's serious.

"We got to save them people whether they want to be saved or not," I tells 'em. "She'll be floodin' the streets in another minute."

I lets down my rope and lets fly at Bib Matthews' bedroom window, bustin' it in. Bib lets out a roar and comes out in his nightie, holdin' a sixshooter in one hand. One-Ton snags him with his rope and draws him out into the street.

The water is runnin' right down the street and as he steps into it, Bib knows this time it's no joke.

She's boilin' along now, spreadin' all over the low part o' town. Me and Stevie takes one side of the street, old George and One-Ton the other, and we races along bustin' windows, yellin', warnin' people out. At the hotel, Tom Fairgraves steps out with a shotgun, but when he sees a river lappin' alongside his porch he lets out a yowl for help.

There's quite a few people in the hotel, and a few more scattered along Main Street, and that water is raisin' so fast you can see it jump.

I don't like to brag, but us Hooker brothers does noble work that night, movin' every last soul outa the part o' town the water is floodin'. If not for us, there might o' been ten or more people drowned.

The whole town is gathered on a high place watchin' us and that flood. When we rescues the last person and all of us rides out safe ourself, I guess you can imajine what a cheer that crowd of Canyon Wellsers gives us heroes.

Well, if you can, you must have a powerful imajination, for they don't raise a cheer. Them Canyon Wells folks is madder'n a flock of wet hens, seemin' to think mebbe we dynamited that dam for a joke. Instead of pinnin' hero medals on our chests, that Bib Matthews he comes over and he says the way that town feels we'd better ride outa there before they take a notion to lynch us.

Nossir, in Canyon Wells they ain't no argyment whether it's better to be a dead hero or a live coward. It's the experience of us Hooker brothers that if you come to that town, you better jist ride around it and not try to be nothin' but a cloud of dust in the distance.

LIAR WEST of the PECOS

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Take a rainy day, a good audience and an old-timer with a glib tongue — and how those tall tales roll

BALDY JOE COLLINS threw down four dog-eared cards, slapped viciously at the swarm of blue-bottle flies holding an aerial circus over his unprotected cranium, knocked one to the floor and leaned over to inspect it more closely.

Then he spat tobacco juice and corral cuss-words into the gray and silver curtain of rain that streamed across the open bunkhouse door.

"I'll be danged!" he drawled, wiping his drooping mustache on the back of his hand. "That there's one of the same danged flies that used to pester me over on the Old Hat Ranch. Yes, sir, it's crippled in the same off-hind leg which it busted the time I rubbed axle grease on my head and made the landin' plumb slippery.

"It was just a colt then, and bein' crippled, I reckon it never got as big as the rest of the flies we used to

Laura Lee wanted music and moonlight

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have over there."

Baldy spat again, turned, glared at the other 09 punchers, and reached for his battered Stetson. The rain droned on the shingles, drenched the gray mesquite and made gullies out of the cowtrails.

There could be no work today. Lafe Wilkins, 09 foreman, chuckled and rolled a cigarette. Everybody knew the game of seven-up was over if Baldy Collins felt talkative.

"Everything was bigger on the Old Hat Ranch, wasn't it, Baldy?" Wilkins inquired mildly.

Baldy took a hunk out of a plug of Star Navy, nodding vigorously, jammed the Stetson on his head, and chewed reflectively for a minute.

The 09 punchers settled themselves to listen to the rain and Baldy Joe, knowing well they could stop neither. Blue tobacco smoke hung low in the damp air, and there was a combined smell of wet leather, linseed-oiled slickers, and tobacco.

Claiming to be a contemporary of the famed Judge Roy Bean, Law West of the Pecos, Baldy Joe had a flair for narration and a fig for veracity. He had earned a title of his own —"Liar West of the Pecos"—and he would defend it without even waiting for a challenge. And so he began.

YES, SIR (said Baldy Joe Collins), things was bigger or stronger over on the Old Hat Ranch —and that included the flies. There was one summer and fall—back in '99—when they growed almost as big as bull-bats.

I've always figgered it might have been caused by the herb juice Pete Pitchin' Hoss made at his shack over by old Fort Lancaster. I'm comin' to Pete Pitchin' Hoss after awhile.

Pete was an Injun trapper, and there was a million flies always hangin' around his shack, and I know for a fact that the herb juice he turned out could do wonders.

Anyhow, that summer was terrible hot and dry, and lots of cows died. We used to go out to skin 'em, because hides was worth six bits apiece, and it wasn't nothin' to see a dead steer fly away just as you rode up with your skinnin' knife.

If you don't believe that, you can still see the bones of a longhorn in the top of a tall cedar down on Howard Draw, where the flies carried a carcass.

If enough of them flies landed on a bob-wire fence, they would bust the wire or pull fence posts right out of the ground. I had a colt I was raisin' to break to the saddle, and I used to whistle him up to the corral and rub his hide and feed him sugar.

One day I made the mistake of rubbin' him on the back with a little sugar still in my hand. Next time I seen that colt, he was so swaybacked from carryin' flies around that his belly was draggin' on the ground.

Well, the ranchers decided they just had to do somethin' about it, and Crockett County offered a bounty on flies' wings. I reckon there must have been more shotguns and shotgun shells sold that year than at any time before or since.

You could get a cent apiece for flies' wings, and it didn't make no difference if there was a dozen holes in 'em where the birdshot went through.

Did I make any *dinero* out of it? I sure did! Only I found out a way to make more than a cent apiece— I saved up the biggest ones and shipped 'em to a friend of mine in Alaska, and he sold 'em for snowshoes durin' the gold rush. That's a fact.

'Course, them that I sold for snowshoes couldn't be all peppered with birdshot, and that's where I had to figger out another way of killin' em. Well, I'd seen how crazy they was about sugar, so I sprinkled a little on top of my head and rubbed axle grease all around it.

Then I would set in the bunkhouse and let 'em light. The big ones always slipped and busted a laig or sprained a wing. Then I'd grab 'em and hold 'em under water in the

horse trough till they was drownded.

Sure, I was bald then. I been bald since I was fourteen—off and on. A dish-faced roan piled me up and busted my skull. The scalp growed back so tight all my hair fell out.

I was goin' to school then, and the teacher graduated me because he figgered I looked too old to be in the third grade.

Yes, sir, I said "off and on." Once I growed myself a fine crop of black hair—for a special purpose. That was what I started to tell you about, fellers.

I was a dang steady, hard-workin' waddy until the day I rode down to Langtry to see Roy Bean and watch the train come in. But the minute I laid eyes on the young Harland filly, I wasn't fit to ride drag on a herd of Holsteins.

One glance was all you needed to see she was a Kentucky thoroughbred—a high-stepper with an arched neck, a sorrel mane, and plenty of fire in her eyes. She was gettin' off the train with a valise, and she dropped a package.

Old Jim Harland—he owned the 7H spread—was there with a buckboard to meet her, and he come rushin' up to pick up the package. But I was quicker by a dang sight, and I was the first cowboy Laura Lee—that was the filly's name—had ever seen.

She smiled, and judgin' from her teeth, I figgered she was about eighteen. When she thanked me, my heart bucked and sunfished like a willer-tail mustang under his first saddle. And then I took off my hat, bein' polite.

Well, sir, that's where I made the first mistake, because when she spotted my bald head, she looked like somebody had hit her between the horns with a fence post, she was so shocked. I reckon I was purty good-lookin'—as long as I kept the naked spots covered.

This here Old Jim Harland was her uncle, and he was from Kentucky, too, and didn't know the Civil War was over. He stepped up and kissed her, and took her away.

I was just like a hoss that's been eatin' loco weed. I seen Laura Lee at a couple of dances in the next few weeks — and ever' time I seen her she was bein' waltzed around by a hombre, named Curly McClelland, who had hair crookeder than a goat's.

I got her off to one side by the mornin' glory vines one evenin', and told her if I couldn't tie myself into double harness with her, I was goin' to drown myself in the Pecos.

WELL, fellers, that was one of the few times in my life that I ever told a lie, because I sure wouldn't drown myself for no woman. But she believed me, and she said she didn't mind the bald head so much.

But it seemed to her that all the cowboys was kinda what she called "pro-sayick." It seemed they didn't have the romance she figgered on findin' in Texas. She wanted music and moonlight and somebody to lift up his head and plunk on a guitar and beller songs under her winder.

Well, this kinda encouraged me. I couldn't sing very much, but I knew dang well that this here Curly McClelland couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. And just when I was tellin' her that I'd ride over to the 7H and serenade her, out comes her uncle.

When she interduced us, Old Jim asked right off where I come from. I told him truthfully that I was born in Montpelier, Vermont, and the danged old coot nearly lifted the roof off the porch bellerin' about the danged blue-bellied Yankees, without givin' me a chance to say I moved to Texas when I was jest two years old.

So that settled my hash as far as Old Jim Harland was concerned. But I was slick-headed in more ways than one, them days. I swiped the old phonygraft out of the Hat Ranch bunkhouse one night and toted it over to the 7H.

I had two records, "Listen to the

Mockin' Bird," and "Nellie Gray," and I figgered both of 'em was sufficiently Southern.

As I said before, this hombre McClelland couldn't sing no more than a bird dog. And when I hid this phonygraft under the bushes and pulled out a guitar and started the record goin', why Laura Lee come to her winder and dang near wept with joy at findin' such romance in a prosayick place like Texas.

But she still laughed when I took off my hat and picked up the rose she throwed me. I reckon it was the moonlight on my head. So when I started home and hid the phonygraft under some rocks up on the hill, I made up my mind then and there that I was goin' to grow myself some hair.

Well, I brooded about bein' bald, for a couple weeks, before I done anything about it. And then all I figgered on doin' was gettin' myself lit up and goin' on a high lonesome and forgettin' all about women. So I rode down to Langtry and went into Roy Bean's Jersey Lily Saloon.

Old Jim Harland was there with a bottle of Kentucky Bourbon in one hand and a lot of gestures in the other. He was addressin' the crowd somethin' like this:

"Gentlemen, my steers have been disappearin' in driblets, and I heah the rest of you have been losin' cattle, too. Are we goin' to sit by idly on ouah verandas and let rustlehs run this heah fair country, or are we goin' to unite, gentlemen, and in the name of the immortal Stonewall Jackson—"

Well, I wasn't interested in other people's troubles, although I knowed that Hat Ranch stock had been vanishin' in twos and threes for months.

I bought myself a bottle and went over to a corner table, because Roy Bean was busy holdin' court in the rear of his place. And after about four shots of forty-rod, I looked up and seen an Injun settin' across the table from me.

The Injun had long, black hair, thicker'n sheep thieves. I said:

"My name is Collins. Have a drink."

The Injun said: "Pete Pitchin' Hoss. Don't care if I do."

We had five apiece. I said: "How come you never see a bald Injun unless he's been scalped?"

He said: "Old Injun secret. Herbs. Grow hair anywhere."

I said: "Sell me a bottle of the stuff. I've just got to grow some hair to keep my wigwam."

Pete Pitchin' Hoss didn't have no sense of humor and that joke was just wasted. He shook his head and said:

"No sell. Trade. One bottle hair tonic. One bottle whisky. Good."

Well, sir, it was against the law to *sell* Injuns whisky, under the Ohio Statutes of 1854, which was what Roy Bean used for a law book. But it wasn't wrong to trade the stuff, I reckon.

Because Roy sold me a bottle when I told him what I wanted it for, and he sold me the cheapest he had, and me and the Injun went across the street to a feed yard, and he took a bottle out of his saddlebags and give it to me for the whisky.

Did it work? I hope to herd sheep in the hereafter if it didn't. I took the stuff back to the ranch with a bottle of whisky, and on the way I got the two mixed up, and took a good swig of that Injun hair tonic by mistake.

Well, of course I found out what I had done in time to keep from swallerin' it, but some of it dribbled on my chin when I spit it out, and before I got home I had a beard three inches long — a thick, black beard.

Only thing wrong with it, it was kinda on sideways, and I had to put some more of the stuff on the other side next day to make it come out even.

If you ain't ever had to shave your tongue and then take tweezers and pull hair out of it, you ain't ever knowed what pain is.

INSIDE a week, I had a crop of hair that the House of David would be proud of. Had to carry a pair of sheep shears around with me, it growed so fast.

All the Hat Ranch waddies tried to hooraw me about wearin' a wig, but I buffaloed 'em and kept my mouth shut, except when I was pickin' the hair out of my tongue.

Eight or ten days later I rode over on Liveoak Creek, where the old fort was, and found Pete Pitchin' Hoss, and give him another bottle of whisky, I was so plumb grateful.

He had about a dozen head of black cattle in his corral, and jest as I rode up he was throwin' one on the ground to do some worm doctorin', or somethin'.

Well, I jumped in and grabbed that critter by the tail, an' you kin imagine how surprised I was to find that the cow's tail stretched jest like rubber—I mean the hair part of it did.

Huh? Naw, I ain't loadin' you. That cow's tail stretched, and when I turned loose of it, it flew back and slapped the cow's rump so hard she bellered like she was bein' branded.

I asked Pete Pitchin' Hoss how come, and he grunted and pointed to some shrubs that was growin' along the side of his corral.

"Guayule," he said.

Well, this here *guayule* plant is what they use to make rubber out of. Don't ask me how it worked, but it did! It didn't affect the steers' hides or their meat none, but the plant seemed to go to their hoofs and horns and hair.

You could have knocked me over with a frijole when I took one of them steers by the horns and found that they was jest as pliable as a piece of garden hose.

I didn't ask the Injun why he was doin' it, but I found out later. In the meantime, he showed me a couple of hosshair lariats he'd been soakin' in a solution of that there rubber plant, and I hope to herd sheep in the hereafter if a thirty-foot lasso wouldn't stretch till it was ninety feet long.

What's that? . . . Naw, I ain't stretchin' things a bit. Right there I started doin' some figgerin'. There was goin' to be a rodeo at Sheffield the next week, and Laura Lee was goin' with this here Curly McClelland.

I had to admit that he was a good show-off cowhand — he could do fancy ropin' and steer bulldoggin' and that kind of stuff, but he hated any work that got his hands real dirty.

Well, I bought the longhorn with the biggest spread from Pete Pitchin' Hoss, and I also bought one of them riatas he'd been soakin'. And then I went to the rodeo kinda early, and fixed things up with a judge who was a friend of mine.

Mebbe you can sabe what I done. The first thing was to see that Curly McClelland drawed the steer with the rubber horns and the elastic tail in the bulldoggin' event.

I wish you could have seen the crowd laugh when that hombre sashayed in next to the black steer on his cuttin' hoss, reached out for the horns and jumped.

Them rubber horns sprung down just like a green cedar limb, then they come back up, and Curly, the most surprised waddy in forty states, went sailin' up into the air and then come down grabbin' for a handful of nothin'.

What he finally grabbed was the steer's tail. He dug his boot-heels into the sod, figgerin' mebbe he could still throw the critter. You know how you tail a yearlin' — twistin' the tail to one side and givin' a heave. Well, Curly tried to do that.

Instead of the steer fallin', he just kept on goin', while the tail stretched out for about six feet. Then, all of a sudden, Curly's foothold slipped. He shot through the air like a rocket and butted the rear end of the steer so hard, the judges ruled him out of the contest for cruelty and unnecessary roughness to animals.

I seen Laura Lee laughin' at him, and I figgered that very night I'd go over and serenade her again, and take off my sombrero and show her my new hair. And in the meantime, I got out my rubber riata and showed the crowd some rope tricks that made 'em set up and take notice.

First, I roped a steer by the horns and took a dolly welter on my saddle-horn, while my cow-hoss set hisself with all four hoofs. Then, when the riata stretched to about ninety feet, I yanked out my .45 and shot close enough to the steer to make him jump.

The instant his f e e t left the ground, he come sailin' back to land standin' up, just two feet away from my hoss — and then, before he could get his wind again, I jumped out of the saddle and bulldogged him so easy it made Curly look like two-bits.

Then I got in the wild cow milkin' contest, and beat everybody hands down because I didn't have to run to the cow's side — I jest yanked on my rubber riata and flew there after ropin' her.

Same way in the stock saddle race of a mile. I was comin' in third, and I just up and roped a fence post by the judges' stand, took a dolly welter around the saddle-horn, and turned my hoss around quick-like, startin' him the other way.

When we got a little stretch on the riata I turned him back and hit the spurs to him hard enough to make him jump. We won that race by an ear — it was the first and only time I ever knowed of that a hoss crossed the finish line sideways.

Well, you can see that by now I was standin' ace-high with Laura Lee Harland, and even her Uncle Jim had to admit that the danged blue-bellied Yankees were pretty good.

SO I went over and serenaded her that night, and probably would have popped t h e question, but I thought I heard somebody sneakin' around in the brush where I had the phonygraft hid.

As it was, I said I had to look after my hoss, and would be back, and when I came back after not findin' anybody, Jim Harland showed up and told Laura Lee it was time for her to be gettin' to bed. So I had to wait till the next night to ask her about gettin' hitched.

I sure was right when I suspicioned s o m e b o d y was sneakin' around in the bush, though. I know now that it was Curly McClelland, the dirty doublecrosser, and he followed me home and seen where I hid the phonygraft and the two records.

How do I know? Because the next evenin' when I rode over there and planted the phonygraft and started strummin' on the guitar and openin' my trap like I was singin', I sure got a surprise.

Instead of "Listen to the Mockin' Bird" or "Nellie Gray" comin' out of that horn, why, out comes a full band, playin' "Marchin' Through Georgia" loud enough to wake the dead.

Mebbe it didn't wake anybody that was dead, but it sure woke up Uncle Jim Harland, who fought with Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, and he must have figgered it was a personal insult.

Because another winder went up in the room next to Laura Lee's, and somebody bellered somethin' mighty profane, and somethin' hit me on the *cabeza* and that was all I knowed (Baldy Joe Collins concluded).

The rain slackened on the roof of the 09 bunkhouse. Baldy Joe arose and stretched. For a minute there was silence, broken only by the musical drip of the water.

Then Lafe Wilkins, the foreman, emitted a snort of disbelief.

"Yuh sure come right by that name—Liar West of the Pecos!" he declared. "That stuff about hair tonic sounds like a downright lie. If Pete Pitchin' Hoss had such a tonic, he could have got rich. And if you growed a crop of hair, where is it now?"

"Yeah!" chimed in Shorty McGee. "And what's more, I know a hombre named Curly McClelland, workin' over on Devil's River, and he's a bachelor. Sounds reasonable that he would have married the girl when you lost out thataway."

Baldy Joe, alias Liar West of the Pecos, yawned. He strode nonchalantly to the door, looked out to see clearing skies, and came back.

"Them assertions is true to a certain extent," he drawled. "Pete Pitchin' Hoss could have got rich—in fact, he was well on his way to gettin' rich. You see, he was the hombre who was rustlin' all the steers.

"Instead of blottin' the brands, or runnin' 'em, or changin' 'em in any way, he just applied some of his Injun hair tonic to the bare spots and growed new hair." Baldy Joe smiled reflectively.

"It would have worked out all right, because Pete was also feedin' the rustled stock on that there *guayule* plant, which made their hoofs noiseless.

"So he could run a whole herd through the hills at night and nobody would hear a sound.

"But Pete Pitchin' Hoss went out one night in the dark of the moon and roped a steer that he thought was black. Well, the steer was really red, and when Pete applied the hair tonic, it made the 7H brand stand out in black hair on that steer's flank."

Baldy Joe's eyes were contemplative. "Even that might have been all right, if he hadn't been usin' one of them rubber riatas by mistake. The steer kicked Pete in the head and started to walk away, leavin' Pete unconscious.

"What did that dang fool steer do but walk a quarter of a mile to the 7H headquarters, with the wind playin' a song on this here rubber riata—which Jim Harland heard.

"All Jim had to do was foller the riata back to the spot where Pete's cow-boss was still standin'.

"So Jim Harland found Pete with the bottle of hair tonic, and thinkin' Pete was a drunk Injun, the old Kentuckian up and removed the temptation by tryin' to drink it all. For years after Pete Pitchin' Hoss had been sent to the pen, Old Jim Harland was fur-lined-inside.

"Then he got dandruff, and it turned into a very serious case, and the old man finally choked to death.

"I reckon they would have caught up with Pete Pitchin' Hoss, anyway, unless he found some way to grow red hair. Because somebody would have noticed there wasn't nothin' but black steers bein' rustled."

BALDY JOE COLLINS removed his Stetson reverently as he spoke of Jim Harland's untimely end, but a fly made a bee-line for his cue ball head.

Then the Liar West of the Pecos hastily jerked the hat on again, glared around him, and continued:

"As for my hair—I was comin' to that. You see when Curly McClelland planted that phony phony-graft record on me, he caused Jim Harland to get so mad he throwed one of Laura Lee's big flower pots out of the winder. Well, it cracked my skull all over again, and the scalp growed back so tight all the hair come out."

Lafe Wilkins snickered. "Yeah?" he asked with deep sarcasm. "And what about Laura Lee, then?"

"Oh, her? Why, she nursed me back to health—right there in the 7H ranchhouse. There ain't nothin' like arousin' the motherin' instinct in a woman, if you want to win her heart and hand. So I married Laura Lee.

"I reckon I never mentioned her name before—jest spoke of her as my wife. And the funniest thing—every one of our four kids was born bald-headed as an egg!

"Yes, sir—I hope to herd sheep in the hereafter if that ain't true!" Baldy Joe Collins said in a most solemn fashion.

A Novelet

BULLET

CHAPTER I

"Days of Forty-Nine"

MUTTERING incoherently, the two men bent over the pan. It was a quite ordinary tin wash pan, a large one, but the two men glared into it with burning eyes. On the bottom of the pan was a smear of fine muddy sediment, but showing in that sediment were a dozen or more yellow particles the size of pinheads. The men, bearded, hairy, dressed in blue shirts, with slouchy wide hats, and pantaloons stuffed in high boots, grinned at each other delightedly. They were pocket miners panning the long hillside for gold.

"Hank, we got it. Over to the right, now Hank."

They moved a little to one side, took a spadeful of earth from the

To Save the Ranch of a Lovely Redhead, Jim

JUSTICE

By A. LESLIE

hillside, dumped it into the pan and gradually washed it away until only the small portion of fine sediment remained. Once more the yellow specks glowed dully in the mud. The men moved over a little farther and washed a third pan. This time there were no yellow specks. The miners chuckled in huge delight, for they knew they were on the right scent. Their delight increased to near insanity when they found gold a short distance to the left of the first digging, but none still a little farther to the left.

They laid an imaginary plan, shaped like a fan with its handle up the hill, and began to pan furiously toward the end of the handle. The rich deposit of gold lay up there at the end of the handle. The gold they had panned was vagrant grains that had escaped the pocket and been washed down the hill.

Woodard Plays a Grim Gun Game Against Odds!

Up the hill they proceeded, washing the earth and narrowing their lines. Finally the "color" strip was a mere foot in width. They began to dig madly, faces flushed, eyes glowing with a feverish light.

Sweat streamed down their faces. The hot California sun brought it seeping through the backs of their blue shirts. Above them snowcapped mountains gleamed like burnished silver under a waterfall. The long flanks of the hills were shaded greens that merged into brown flecked with the white of rushing water. All about were clumps of chaparral and manzanita and piñon pine.

SUDDENLY Hank gave a frenzied yell. "Amos, I done hit it!"

Up came a spadeful of earth and quartz lovely with soiled lumps and leaves and sprays of gold. There was close to a thousand dollars' worth in that one spadeful! Hank leaped to Amos' side and drove in his spade. It came up loaded with more gold. The partners dropped their tools and did a wild jig. Almost instantly they went back to digging madly until they were exhausted.

"We got thousands of dollars' worth already, and there's still more in sight!" exulted Amos.

As Hank opened his lips to reply, a cold voice sounded behind them: "Just keep right on diggin', gents; we can use all you turn up."

The two old miners whirled, and stared with hanging jaws. Three men had ridden up the hill, the thick grass muffling the beat of their horses' hoofs. They sat their cayuses within a dozen feet of the pocket. Old Amos breathed a startled word:

"Horner!"

The man who had spoken nodded grimly: "Yeah, it's Horner—Cliff Horner, what owns this land you damned old packrats are diggin' up!"

"But minin' law says we got a right to hunt for gold," old Amos began in a pleading voice, "and we ain't hurtin' your grazin' land any by diggin' these hillsides a little."

Horner snarled an oath. He was a handsome man with snapping black eyes, black hair and a square bronzed face. His lips were thin—too thin—but well formed. His nose was straight, his teeth white. He was over six feet tall and heavily built.

"I've warned all you old packrats off of my land," he barked. "Now you get what's comin' to you."

He rode forward a pace, his big tanned hands worked swiftly and a rope sailed through the air. The loop settled around old Amos' shoulders and tightened. Amos was jerked off his feet.

"Take the other one, Hal," growled Horner.

Another lariat snapped out and downed Hank. Helpless on the ground, the old pocket miners yelled their terror.

"All right," snapped Horner. "Down the hill with 'em—leave what's left for the coyotes."

He whirled his horse, drove his spurs home and then jerked the animal back to its haunches in a plunging, sliding halt.

"Who the devil are you and what yuh want?" he bellowed.

Directly in front of Horner and only a few yards distant, a man who had ridden from a nearby clump of pinons sat a magnificent black gelding. There was a quizzical light in his level gray-green eyes, the suspicion of a grin quirking the corners of his wide, good-humored mouth. He was tall, taller even than Horner, but of a slimmer build, with wide shoulders that tapered down to a supple waist and narrow hips.

"Where's the jury?" he asked mildly.

Horner's jaw sagged, he gulped. "Why—why—what the devil!" he stuttered. The stranger went on in the same easy drawl:

"You see, the only time I ever had to answer questions right off was once when they was a jury settin' right alongside me."

Horner's face turned red, his black eyes snapped dangerously.

"You get out of my way and off my land!" he snarled.

"Sure," agreed the other, "but you got your rope tangled with a feller back there. Don't you think you ought to get it unhitched first? That feller mightn't want to go the same way you're goin'."

"Mind your own business!" yelled Horner with an oath as his horse lunged forward, jerking old Amos over the stones.

One instant the stranger's slim, bronzed hands were empty save for the loosely hanging reins. The next they were filled with long black guns, from the muzzle of one of which curled a wisp of smoke. Old Amos lay with one end of the slackened rope tangled about him. The stranger's bullet had neatly cut it in two. The stranger's voice, all the soft drawl gone out of it, bit the air.

"Freeze, the three of you! Slack off that rope, you on the pinto. Watch how you move your hands or they'll be slowed up plumb permanent. What's this all about? What's the idea of snaggin' a couple of old fellers who haven't got a gun between 'em? I heard tell that Californy was a man's country! Didn't expect to find skunks!"

The red had left Cliff Horner's face. It was a gray mask of rage and hatred.

"You—got the drop on us, now, but the time'll come when you haven't. Then—"

HIS voice jerked to silence as the other's hands moved. The big guns slid into their sheaths, the stranger leaned forward a trifle and smiled thinly into Horner's eyes. His voice was easy, drawling once more, but edged with a terrible menace.

"I haven't got the drop on you, feller. Go ahead, fill your hand!"

For a long moment Horner stared, licking dry lips. His eyes were calculating. His men sat tensely behind him, waiting for him to act. Horner slowly shook his head.

"Nope," he said quietly. "I know a quick-draw man when I see one. You still got the drop on me, feller, but I'm tellin' you again, the time'll come when you won't!"

The tall stranger smiled his thin smile. "That's fine," he said, "but be plumb sure, feller, you recognize that time right when you figure it's come. Now I reckon you got business some place else."

He watched Horner and his men out of sight and turned to the miners.

"What's it all about?" he asked.

They told him, volubly, "That feller don't really own the land," Hank protested, "but he thinks he does. He raises catle all over this section of the country. He ain't got any use for pocket miners and treats 'em like you saw him treatin' us today. He's rich and don't need the gold in these here little pockets, but he's just naturally mean. He knows these pockets is the only chance old fellers like us have to make a livin'. All the good claims been staked long ago."

The stranger nodded sympathetically. "What you say his name is?"

Name's Horner," said Amos.

"Horner!"

"Uh-huh, Cliff Horner. Call's his ranch the Tumblin' H."

The stranger's eyes narrowed slightly. He asked another question. "Any other ranches around here?"

Old Amos shook his head. "Nope, except one or two little ones. Horner's put all the others outa business. He'll gobble up what's left soon."

"Town anywheres near?" the stranger asked.

"You can hit a trail just the other side that bald-topped hill," old Amos told him. "Follow that trail south for three miles and you come to Jacinto. She's a town, all right, a humdinger. Here, take this handful of nuggets along with you, stranger. Nope? Well, if you won't, you won't, but you sure got to pack a heap of thanks with you. *Adios!*"

They watched him out of sight, lounging carelessly in the saddle, swaying with instinctive grace to the movements of the horse. Old Amos

heaved a sigh.

"Hank," he said, "I'd give every dadburned speck of this gold to be like that feller."

Hank shook his head. "When they make his kind, they break the mold."

CHAPTER II

Blood and Gold

THE tall man on the black horse reached the trail and then turned south. As the cayuse ambled along, he drew a letter from his pocket and glanced quickly at the contents. He read:

The feller bringing this is Jim Woodard a square shooting hombre. He pines to look Californy over a spell. He worked for me on the Triple K here at Concha, Arizona. He is a top hand. Give him a job. You remember me.

Cal Kearney.

It was addressed to *Cliff Horner, Tumblin' H Ranch, Californy!*

The man on the black horse, whose name was Jim Woodard, slowly tore the letter to bits and scattered them along the trail. A whimsical grin quirked the corners of his mouth.

"Somehow I got a notion Cliff Horner wouldn't give us a job now, feller," he told the gelding. "Well, we'll just mosey along to that Jacinto town and see what we can see."

The dusk was sifting a lovely blue dust through the red-gold of the sunset when Jim Woodard entered Jacinto. Almost the first building he saw was a restaurant from which filtered enticing odors. Jim pulled a single coin from his pocket and gazed at it fondly.

"Horse," he said, "one of us eats."

He passed the restaurant and pulled up in front of a livery stable a little further on. The stable keeper got the coin. The black got a stall and put on the nosebag. Jim pulled his belt a notch tighter and sauntered up the street.

"She's a humdinger, all right," he agreed with old Amos after no more than a casual survey of the outskirts. "That gold strike on Tuolumne Creek sure must be rich."

It was a rich strike. Tuolumne Creek poured a yellow flood into the brawling, bellowing, blood-spattered town that crouched in the shadow of the purple-blue mountains. The town soaked it up and yammered for more. Each night the brawny pick wielders of Tuolumne Creek tried to choke the yammer with gold.

Deftly rolling a cigarette, Jim Woodard strolled through the swinging doors of a saloon. The whole inside of it seemed to explode as he entered. Lead squalled over his shoulder and slammed into the doors. A sawed-off shotgun let go with a rattling crash that set the lamps to jumping. Yells, curses and the bangety-thud of smashing furniture helped matters along.

Jim Woodard went along the wall a half-dozen paces like a flash of blue lightning before he realized the lead slingers were not interested in him. Tense, alert, he watched the shindig boiling at the end of the big room.

Somebody sent a bullet clang-jangling among the bottles on the back bar. A thrown knife streaked across the room, missed its intended target by a paper thickness and stood quivering and snapping in the wall. A cursing, squalling, fighting knot of men went careening through the door. Shots sounded in the street, then the rattlety-tap of fast hoofs going away from there. Jim Woodard picked his way through splintered chairs and tables to the bar. Two men carried a body into a back room. A swamper swabbed up the blood and removed broken furniture.

"They got the lookout," a bartender told Jim. "Drilled him dead center. He was dead when he pulled the triggers of his shotgun. Who did it? That gang of trouble raisers from Horner's Tumblin' H. They're always startin' somethin'—and finishin' it! Row began over that poker game the house was dealin'. Here, have a drink on me. My nerves need

a little steadyin' and I don't like to drink alone."

AS JIM finished downing his drink, a quiet looking man in black strolled up to him. His quick glance flickered over the tall cowboy from head to foot. He spoke in a voice that was softly pleasant.

"I'd take it sort of kind, stranger, if you'd roll me one of those cigarettes you're smokin'."

Jim stared an instant—the request was unusual—and then reached for "the makings."

"Plumb pleased to oblige," he drawled.

The quiet man watched the slim fingers of Jim's hand manipulate tobacco sack and paper. He took the finished "smoke," lighted it and inhaled deeply.

"Nope, you didn't spill any of the tobacco that time, either," he said.

Jim stared a question. The quiet man smiled fleetingly with a flash of white teeth in his dark face.

"I saw you rollin' you're cigarette while the shooting was going on," he explained. "They wasn't a speck of tobacco dribbing over."

"Tobacco costs money," Jim said.

The other man nodded. "Cowboy, ain't you?" It was a statement.

"Sort of figure on bein'," Jim admitted, "but it looks like I got my rope in a snarl topside this here California range. Reckon I'll have to mosey on south before I connect."

"Out of a job, eh?"

"I sure am raisin' no sweat just at present."

"Maybe I can help you raise one," the other said, and Jim nodded. "My name is Quigley and I own this place. My lookout got plugged in that argument with the Tumblin' H horned toads. He made the mistake of letting 'em get started before he went into action. I'll need a man to take over the job and I sort of had a notion you might like to use it to fill in with while you're gettin' located."

Jim considered the offer for several minutes, while the smoke curled from their cigarettes and an attentive bartender filled the glasses at their elbows. He did not particularly like the idea of sitting on a stool with a shotgun across his knees and his eyes skinned for potential trouble makers, but he did need a job. His empty stomach told him that in no uncertain terms. Abruptly he made up his mind.

"I'll give it a whirl," he told Quigley. "But I'll run the job my own way without orders or interference. That satisfactory?"

Quigley smiled slightly, and nodded. "Hardly figgered you'd take it any other way," he admitted. "You don't look like the order-taking kind. Guess we ought to have another drink to tie the proposition."

Jim grinned. "If it's all the same to you," he chuckled, "suposin' we put on the nose bag. I haven't eaten for so long I've forgot how to chew."

Jim went to work for Mort Quigley in the saloon.

"Nope, I don't want any shotgun or no stool," he told Mort. "Those things have got more lookouts killed than their own cussedness. You say you want the games wept straight? All right, straight they are."

Jim caught one of the house men dealing crooked the first night he worked on the job. He took the man aside and quietly told him what he had seen. The gambler, a hard-faced individual with a knife scar furrowing his right cheek, snarled at Jim from the corner of his mouth.

"I don't need a lookout to tell me how to handle my table," he snapped. "You get away from me and attend to your own business."

Jim took him by the collar of his coat and the seat of his pants and threw him out through the swinging doors. A pretty girl who was passing the saloon gasped as she saw the gambler land on the porch of the First Chance.

"I'll teach you to get tough with me," the gambler snarled as Jim stepped out through the doors.

The gambler got to his feet, a re-

volver in his hand. Jim hit him and knocked him to his knees. The girl took a good look and then turned and hurried away. The gun dropped from the gambler's hand.

"Get up and I'll give you some more," Jim said, fists clenched.

"Not me," muttered the gambler. "I know when I've had enough."

He got to his feet and hurried down the street without even stopping to pick up his gun. He left town that night.

The word went around town that Mort Quigley's First Chance Saloon and dance hall ran square games. Business picked up. Men fought for places at the tables. Quigley hired two new bartenders and a flock of dancing girls. Jim Woodard, tall, lean, with his level green eyes and good-humored mouth, sauntered about, greeting known patrons by names, keeping a watchful eye on the games. Quigley doubled his wages the first week.

And then the Tumbling H rode into town. Jim watched them come, lithe young cowhands with grin-quirked lips. He knew the kind—hard-working, hard-playing, hard-shooting. He repressed a sympathetic grin as he watched them. They swaggered through the swinging doors of the First Chance, drank, danced, and finally gathered at the poker tables.

Business was good. Men came and went. The bar was crowded, likewise the dance floor. The games were lively. Jim glanced from time to time to the table where the Tumbling H cowboys wrangled good-naturedly over their stud game. He noticed that they kept shooting glances toward the swinging doors.

"Those riders are expectin' somebody," he told himself.

Two men strolled through the doors and to the bar. They did not look toward the Tumbling H table, but Jim sensed a sudden tenseness there. The Tumbling H boys no longer glanced toward the door.

"Looks like the company has arrived," Jim murmured.

Covertly he studied the two men, who stood sipping whisky and conversing in low tones. One was long and lanky with sunken chops and eyes like black buttons. His mouth was a thin, bloodless gash in his bony face. The other was broad and squat with cold blue eyes, and thick lips with a cruel twist. An oddly assorted pair, apparently, but there was an air of similarity about them despite their striking physical differences. Ruthless efficiency and cold deadlines featured both. The black-handled guns sagging low in worn holsters were significant.

"Salty hombres," Jim mused. "They didn't come in just for a drink, either."

HE REACHED for his tobacco and papers and began building a cigarette. Loud voices suddenly boomed up from the Tumbling H poker table. Accusations were tossed back and forth.

The wranglers, a couple of young fellows with rakishly tipped Stetsons, were arguing fiercely. One reached for his gun; the other followed suit. They stood up, tugging at their holsters. Jim Woodard said nothing, and rolled his cigarette.

The two punchers yelled louder and began drawing their guns. Jim was still busy with his cigarette. There was the hint of a twinkle in his green eyes. The two punchers were glinting oblique glances in his direction. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the two hard-faced men step away from the bar and spread apart. Jim tossed half-humorous words at the young punchers.

"All right, boys, you carried out orders. Now just sit down and watch the show."

Then he turned, ignoring the Tumbling H cowboys, gaping at him in slack-jawed astonishment, and faced the two men by the bar. Now there was nothing but bitter contempt in his voice.

"It didn't work, you hydrophobia

skunks! Fill your hands, or crawl!"

Eyes glinting, he saw the two gunmen stiffen, glance at each other. Their hands swept down.

The cigarette left Jim's hands in a puff of paper and spilled tobacco. Before the tiny white sheet had fluttered to the floor, his guns were spouting flame and smoke. Weaving, ducking, slewing sideways, he hammered the two gunmen with bullets.

His hat was swept from his head, one of his shirt sleeves was riddled, a dripping red smear leaped across one lean cheek. Cramming shells into his empty guns, he peered through the smoke haze at the two quiet figures on the floor beside the bar. Behind him stood Mort Quigley, a sawed-off shotgun trained on the Tumbling H cowboys, who showed no disposition for trouble.

Screaming women and bellowing men were fighting to get out the doors. A chance bullet had knocked one of the big hanging lamps loose from its moorings and it was guttering and smoking.

Jim holstered his guns and walked over to the Tumbling H table.

"Go home and tell your boss his cute scheme was a flash in the pan."

Before they could reply he walked back to the bar. Quigley lowered the shotgun and the Tumbling H punchers, muttering among themselves, filed out of the saloon.

"It was cut and dried," Jim told Quigley as a couple of swampers carried out the bodies and swabbed up the blood. "Those Tumblin' H hairpins were to start arguing—I got a notion they didn't have much of an idea what was goin' to happen—and give those two horned toads a chance to get the drop on me when I was stopping the row at the table."

Quigley nodded. Jim told him about his run-in with Cliff Horner.

"Yeah," he replied. "Horner is the kind who never forgets. You got to look out for him all the time."

The head bartender spoke up. "I know those two punctured gents," he said. "They come from down Mexico and were rated some pumpkins with a gun. They specialized in such nice little businesses as wideloopin' and paid killin's. The community ought to give you a vote of thanks, Jim, for rubbin' 'em out."

THE community gave him something better. The following night when he came to work, Quigley called him into his office. Several men were seated there.

"Jim, I know how tired you're gitting of being cooped up inside," said Quigley. "These here gents have got a proposition for you and though I'll hate bad to lose you, I advise you to take 'em up on it."

"It's like this, Woodard," one of the men said quickly, "we elected Tom Cartwright sheriff last month and he went and let his horse roll on him and bust his leg in three places. Doc says he'll be laid up for months. Tom had a couple of deputies who are all right in their way, but they don't weigh much when it comes to stackin' up against the gunslingin' hombres who infest our fair city. We have got no objection to the boys enjoyin' themselves, but we believe peaceable citizens have got a right to attend to their business without gettin' punctured too frequently. We're sort of set against stage coach robberies and wideloopings and such, so we think we'd ought to get a special deputy to take over till the sheriff gets pert again. Couple of us were in here last night when you downed those two varmints and we figured you'd be a good man for the job. You'll pull down the same wages Quig is paying you."

"And the job'll get you outside on a horse," Quigley added.

Woodard became, to all practical purposes, sheriff of the county. It appeared that Cartwright's injuries would leave him a permanent cripple. Propped up on a couch in his office, he received reports and offered suggestions, but the active work of the office fell to Jim.

"You're doing fine," the rugged

old frontiersman told him. "When election time rolls around they'll be runnin' you for sheriff. I'll hang on till then and help all I can, but it's up to you to handle the job, son."

Being peace officer in the turbulent town of Jacinto was no bed of roses, but Jim welcomed the change. The active outdoor life suited him much better than the stuffy air of Quigley's saloon. He preferred the smell of fresh powder smoke to that of stale tobacco any day of the week.

WIDELOOPERS and holdup artists quickly learned that the new deputy was a man who feared nothing that breathed the breath of life and was uncannily skillful with the long-barreled black guns that sagged low against his muscular thighs. Jacinto and environs became singularly free from their depredations.

Jim paid little attention to the ordinary rows and shootings attendant to the everyday life of the town.

"Let the boys have their fun," he said. "So long as they let other folks alone, they got a right to enjoy themselves."

Sheriff Cartwright agreed with him and did not relish the orders he was forced to give Jim one day.

"Cliff Horner is back of this," he told his deputy. "There was a row in the Bottoms Up last night and Horner's foreman got plugged. Horner came in this mornin' and swore out a warrant for Tim Cooley—he works out to the Bar C—and—"

"Shucks!" growled Jim. "It was a fair fight, wasn't it?"

"I reckon it was," agreed Cartwright, "but two of Horner's men swore Martin, the foreman, didn't have a gun."

"Mighty funny, one of that outfit goin' around not heeled," said Jim. "But I'll serve the warrant. How do you get to the Bar C?"

Cartwright told him, and Jim set out in a driving, bitterly cold rain —the kind of rain that swirls down from the high mountains at times and makes a man forget California was ever warm or sunny. Jim hunched his big shoulders to the bitter wind that came wailing in from the ocean to fight with the cold currents tumbling down from the hills. By the time he turned from the main trail and threaded a less used track that led to the Bar C he was in an evil temper. Most of his anger was directed against Cliff Horner.

"What I can't figger," he muttered, "is whether that horned toad is just tryin' to make things unpleasant for me or if he's got some other ax to grind. Maybe he don't like the folks what run this here Bar C. Feller by the name of Carson, that's what Tom said—Micky Carson. Say, now if that ain't a pretty sight! This is a real spread!"

The rain had slackened to a crawling icy drizzle and the mists were swirling higher. Jim had ridden through a thick grove and suddenly found himself in the mouth of a wide valley walled by low hills. Far ahead, a mighty battlement of cliffs shimmered in the gray light. Drifting down from their lofty summit, a feathery plume of waterfall gleamed like an emerald set in sun-drenched snow. Jim could see the stream, edging the green garment of the valley with silver, that washed the swelling slopes of the hills and turned abruptly south only a short distance from where he sat his horse. He regarded it with a cattleman's sense of values.

"That water's worth plenty in this dry section," he mused. "Darned if it ain't the creek that runs across Horner's Tumblin' H. I wondered where it came from. Lucky for him it turns south right here instead of north like a feller would suppose from the lay of the land. Without that water, Horner's ranch wouldn't be worth a busted cartridge. All right, Smokey, guess if we foller that trail to the right we'll hit that dadblamed Bar C hangout."

The big black horse snorted disgusted agreement and plodded wearily up the muddy trail. Half an hour

later a trim white ranchhouse, built Mexican style, hove into view.

CHAPTER III

Drygulched

NO difficulty in serving the warrant was anticipated by Jim. Cooley, he had gathered from the sheriff, was a peaceable old puncher who never started trouble but was willing to take care of all that came his way. He was well liked.

"He knows he'll get a square deal in town and won't raise no ruckus," Jim reasoned as he rode up to the wide veranda. He tied his horse to a post and went up the steps.

He knocked on the door and immediately heard the squeak of a moved-back chair. He waited a moment and knocked again, louder. There was a soft slither of footsteps and silence.

Jim swore under his breath, grasped the knob, flung the door open—hurled himself onto his face.

Crash!

The slug screeched through the opening where Jim had stood a brief instant before. He lunged forward, gripped a pair of booted ankles and heaved. A body slammed down on top of him, the gun roared again and Jim felt the blaze singe his hair. Across the room hurtled another figure to land amid the tangle of arms and legs on the floor.

The newcomer was a handful. Jim felt steely fingers grinding into his throat. A hard fist jolted his jaw and he saw comets and constellations.

Then the big cowboy really went into action. A sweep of his arm slammed the gun wielder sprawling halfway across the room. He ripped the throttling hand from his throat and let loose a punch that had every ounce of his two hundred pounds of hard muscle behind it. It caught the strangler in the chest and knocked him out.

Jim came surging erect, hands streaking to his guns. One of his spurs caught in a rug and he went sprawling. He caught the glint of a drawn gun as he hit the floor. The gun was throwing down on him, with a pair of blazing blue eyes behind it.

A scream split the tingling silence as Jim's body tensed against the tearing impact of the slug. Crash!

"Tim, that isn't Horner!"

Jim heard the booming report filter through a terrific explosion that blew the top of his head off and let out endless coils of black darkness that wrapped him around and around and shut out all sound and light.

Clawing up out of that cold darkness was not pleasant. Jim got his eyes above it, opened them, and shut them quickly against a crackling wave of pain. A pale green nausea was crawling about his insides. Finally it stopped slithering around the base of his throat and he risked opening his eyes again. He looked squarely into other eyes, big and blue and anxious. He heard a tremulous sigh of relief. Above the eyes was a white forehead and a mass of wavy hair the color of a forest pool brimful of sunset. His gaze dropped a little.

"Just three—one on one side and two on the other!" he murmured.

"Oh, Jim," said a trembling soft voice, "he's delirious!"

"No, I ain't, either," declared Jim. "I can see 'em plain."

"S-see what?" demanded the red-haired girl who bent over him.

"Three freckles on your nose," said Jim. "Redheads have lots!"

The owner of the freckles straightened up with speed. "And I thought you were badly hurt and out of your head!" she exclaimed indignantly.

Jim closed his eyes and gave a hollow groan. "I'm sufferin' somethin' terrible," he declared in a weak voice. "I don't think I got much chance to get well!"

A chuckle sounded on the opposite side of the couch on which he lay. Jim slanted his eyes in that direction and saw freckles aplenty.

He also saw bright blue eyes in a wrinkled old face.

"Sure, and if I hadn't been afther pullin' me goon to one side hard as I could when I heard Mickie yelp, you wouldn't be afther havin' no chance a-tall," said the owner of the face.

Jim sat up, although the effort required sent a new set of pains hammering at his creased head.

"Who's Mickie?" he demanded.

"That's her on the other side of you," said the old Irishman. "Miss Mickie Carson, as sweet a colleen as ever made the mistake of not bein' born on the Ould Sod."

Jim's eyes jerked to the girl and back to the speaker.

"And you're Tim Cooley," he said.

"None other," the old man admitted with a nod. "What's left of him afther stoppin' that pile-drive of a fist of yours. Howly Mither, me breast bone is stickin' out of the back of me neck!"

Jim swung his feet to the floor and stood up. His fingers touched the neat bandage encircling his forehead.

"Cooley," he said quietly, "I've got a warrant for you, for shootin' Sam Martin last night. What's the idea of throwin' lead at me?"

Old Tim goggled at him. "Howly Mither!" he gasped. "Are you the new sheriff?"

"New deputy," Jim corrected him, "but why—"

"It was a mistake," broke in Cooley earnestly. "We thought you were Cliff Horner. Horner sent word he was comin' over here, and comin' shootin'. You're afther bein' just about the same height and close enough to his build to look a lot like him when it's sorter dim. Plumb sorry it happened, but you ain't hurted much. Didn't much more'n break the skin."

Jim nodded. "I thought there was somethin' funny about it. Horner swore out the warrant."

The red-haired girl suddenly shoved Cooley aside and faced Jim.

"And you're here to do his dirty work!" she blazed. "I might have known Horner would have the sheriff's office under his thumb, like he has everything else around here except the Bar C. It wasn't Tim who shot at you when you opened the door. I did it. I'm sorry I missed!"

Jim stared at her in astonishment. She was small and slight, coming hardly to his shoulder, but her figure was rounded and curved where roundness and curves were in order. White teeth shone back of her rose-red lips. Her slim, sun-golden hands were balled into hard little fists. Her angry blue eyes, with their astonishingly long lashes, were so dark as to seem almost black. They met Jim's cool and level green gaze defiantly.

"It sure wasn't your fault you missed, ma'am," he drawled. "I felt the wind of the first one and the fire of the second. I was just movin' so fast all the time you just simply couldn't connect. Hope I didn't hurt you when I pulled you down."

"There, there, now, Mickie," old Tim Cooley soothed. "This officer ain't to blame. He has to serve warrants when folks swear 'em out, no matter who it is swears 'em. Don't you worry none about ould Tim. I'll be right back."

"Cooley," said Jim, "I have no business askin' a prisoner questions, but I'm goin' to ask one. Did Martin have a gun?"

"He had two," declared Cooley. "He threw down on me with both of 'em. If I hadn't shaded him a bit he'd have cut me in two. I busted his shoulder for him."

Jim nodded. "I had a notion it was sort of that way. Well, we better get goin' if we're goin' to make town before plumb dark."

"We got time to eat a snack first," said Cooley.

THROUGHOUT the simple meal old Tim threw together in a hurry, Mickie Carson maintained a hostile silence. Jim caught himself wondering how it was possible for a small, slightly tip-tilted nose with

three freckles on its straight bridge to express such disdain.

"Good-by, Tim," she told Cooley. "I'll be riding to town right away to get you bail, if you need it."

"Sort of salty little lady when she goes on the prod," chuckled Jim as they rode down the valley.

"Shure and she is that," agreed Cooley. "Takes afther her dad. He was a fightin' Irishman if there ever was one. Funny thing about Mike Carson," he added. "He dropped out of sight about a year ago. Rode into the hills one day and nobody's ever seen hide or hair of him since. Makes me be afther thinkin' maybe the Little People lives in those hills back there. Them what snatches folks and takes 'em underground and makes 'em work in their gold mines for ever and ever. Somethin' sure took poor Mike Carson."

"There's plenty of people in them hills that'd put folks underground," Jim said, and nodded. "Most especially if they happen to be ridin' a good horse and carryin' a little money. I suppose Miss Carson was named Mickie after her dad?"

Old Tim chuckled. "Nope, her dad called her Virginia, after her mother who died when the colleen was born. 'Twas me who named her Mickie. Mike and Mickie I called 'em. Since poor Mike was taken, me and her been runnin' the ranch. I don't know what she'll do if they hold me in town long."

"Won't nothin' come of it," Jim assured him. "How'd you come to shoot Martin?"

Cooley hesitated. "A sorta funny business," he confessed. "Martin is mighty sure and fast with a gun. The story goes that he killed his man before he come West—that's why he came. 'Twas he who picked the quarrel, not me."

"Any reason for that?"

Cooley's head shook. "That's a still funnier business," he said. "There's just one reason I can think of, and it sure is funny. The other day when I was combin' the brakes of our south range for strays, I run onto a couple of gents sittin' their horses and talkin' back of a big rock. I was smack on top of them before they heard me and I heard plenty. But I don't think I heard as much as they figured I did. I thought at first they were goin' to smoke me up right then and there, but I was carryin' a rifle acrost me saddle bow. I rode off keepin' a eye on 'em, and then two days later Sam Martin starts that shenanigan with me."

"I don't see how the two tie up," objected Jim. Old Tim chuckled.

"Well, you see," he drawled, "the spalpeens what were afther doin' the talkin' together happened to be Sam Martin and Cliff Horner. I heard Horner say—"

Thud! Cr-r-rack!

THE spiteful spat of the distant rifle was an echo on the heels of the bullet reaching its mark. Old Tim Cooley rose in his stirrups, swayed an instant and pitched to the ground, blood pouring from his mouth. Jim went off his horse almost as fast, jerking his own rifle from the saddle boot as he landed on his feet. Eyes blazing green slits in his bronzed face, he swept the nearby hills, but there was no wisp of smoke, no telltale glint of metal to betray the drygulcher.

Jim crouched beside his horse, peering, listening, tense as finely drawn wire. A swiftly approaching click of hoofs brought him around, rifle ready. Eyes glinting behind the sights, he waited. The horseman was pounding through the grove he and Tim Cooley had just cleared.

Out of the grove burst a racing pinto. Jim's rifle barrel steadied to granite stillness. The black muzzle yawned hungrily. With a chopped-in-two oath he dropped the rifle and knelt beside the wounded man. The rider was Mickie Carson.

The pinto foamed to a stop and Mickie swung to the ground with the lithe grace of a questing sunbeam. She dropped to her knees on

the other side of old Tim and across his still body her blue eyes blazed hate at Jim Woodard. Her voice, quivering with unshed tears, said:

"I suppose your alibi will be he tried to escape! You—murderer!"

Jim stared at her in slack-jawed amazement. He started to speak, but the words died in his throat. His lips set in a bleak line and his voice was cold when he did speak.

"We got to get him to a doctor," he said. "He took it through the lungs. Give me that handkerchief you're wearin' around your neck. Mine ain't long enough by itself. Now steady him while I get into my saddle. I got to carry him in my arms and hold his head up. Any other way and he'll choke to death."

Between them they got old Tim to Jacinto and the doctor's office.

"Looks rather bad," said the doctor, "but these old hard shells are tough. I can pull him through."

Tight-lipped, somber-eyed, Mickie Carson sat by the old man's bedside throughout the night. Jim Woodard helped the doctor.

"Can't figure what's wrong with those young folks," the old doctor complained to One Long Hop, his Chinese cook. "I never saw a finer looking couple, and they just sit and glare at each other. Now when I was a young man—"

"That long time back," nodded Hop. "Maybe I same fool then, you was now then, too. Uh-huh?"

"You shut up and watch that soup!" growled the doctor.

CHAPTER IV

Red Hair and Red Blood

DAYLIGHT found old Tim still unconscious but resting easier.

"He'll make it," declared Doctor Hawkins. "You can't kill that kind, I tell you. They just dry up and blow away and the devil reaches out from under a log and gathers 'em in."

Jim had a talk with Sheriff Cartwright before he went to bed. He had been doing serious thinking.

"How long has Cliff Horner been in this part of the country, and where did he come from?" he asked the sheriff.

"Dropped in about three years back, best as I recollect," replied Cartwright. "Bought up part of the land he owns now. Paid spot cash. Later on he bought more—froze little ranchers out, mostly, and bought 'em out cheap. He tried to buy the Bar C mighty hard after Mike Carson dropped outa sight, I been told, but that gal of Mike's wouldn't sell. Horner was sort of wrathy. He wants that spread bad."

Jim nodded understanding. "Ain't surprisin'," he told the sheriff. "His water comes down that valley and it wouldn't be any trick at all to turn that creek north and down the divide on that side. Just imagine somebody that hasn't got any use for Horner, and don't mind seein' dogies die thirsty, gettin' hold of that range! Where'd Horner be then?"

"He knows he wouldn't ever have to worry 'bout anything like that from the Carsons," objected the sheriff. "They're white folks."

"Uh-huh," agreed Jim, "but they isn't much doubt about it but that Carson is dead, and you can't never figure what a gal'll do. She's liable to sell out and go away any time. Women are uncertain."

Jim found Cooley conscious when he visited him the following day. Old Tim's eyes brightened at sight of the deputy, but he was under strict doctor's orders not to speak.

"You keep your trap shut for a week or more," Doc Hawkins had said. "You get to gabbin' and you'll start the bleedin' again, and that'll be your finish."

To make matters worse, Tim could neither read nor write.

Mickie Carson, Jim learned, had gone back to her ranch once she was assured Cooley was out of danger.

"Nobody but her left to run the spread," said Doc Hawkins. "Sort of a chore for a girl under twenty."

Jim agreed with Doc, and worried about her.

"She hasn't got any business up there by herself," he growled. "I wouldn't put anythin' past that Horner sidewinder. He wants that spread mighty bad and with her out of the way, he'd have darn little trouble grabbin' it off. Bet you he knows plenty about who shot Tim, too. Sure wish the old man would get well enough to spout again. I want to know what he heard said that put Horner so much on the prod."

Jim rode to the Bar C the following day. There was nobody at the ranchhouse, so he went in search of Mickie.

He found her mending a corral fence. She regarded him hostilely as he rode up and dismounted.

"What do you want now?" she demanded.

Jim grinned as he strode toward her. "Just wanted to see how you're gettin' on," he said.

"Well, you see. Now suppose you be getting on."

Jim's grin widened to a chuckle. "I see you busted two knuckles tryin' to handle those pliers," he said. "That's no kind of work for a lady.

"The lady is perfectly able to do it without any advice from Cliff Horner's paid killers," she snapped.

THE grin left Jim's face. "You're goin' say that once too often," he told her.

"I'd like to know what you're going to do about it."

"What'm I goin' to do about it? I'm goin' to turn you over my knee and spank you, that's what!"

Mickie Carson's red lips parted, her breath caught with the chopped-off suddenness of a slammed door. She stared at the big puncher. Something in the set of his lean jaw and the way his green eyes regarded her told her that he meant exactly what he said.

"If—if I had a gun, I—I'd shoot you!" she gasped.

One of Jim Woodard's bronzed hands moved like a smooth ripple of air. A big black Colt flipped from his holster, turned in the air and thrust at the girl, butt first.

"There yuh are, ma'am," said Jim. "Let's see how good you are."

Her face was paper-white with anger. She snatched the gun from his hand and for a crawling second Jim thought she was going to use it. With a half sob she flung it to the ground and turned back to the broken fence. Jim picked up the gun, leathered it and shoved her aside.

"I told you that was no job for a lady," he said. "Go get some wire."

For two hours they worked side by side, speaking only when necessary. Finally the fence was in shape. The sun dropped down the sky.

"Time to eat," he told Mickie. "You rustle some chuck while I hay the horses in the little corral. Cookin' is a woman's work."

Mickie gave him one look, but she went to the ranchhouse without a word. Soon smoke rose from the kitchen chimney.

"Not bad," Jim told her when he rolled his after-supper cigarette. "You can cook, even if you can't do much of anythin' else."

Mickie set her red lips tight and said nothing.

"Cooley told me you got to get a shippin' herd together pronto or lose a big order," Jim went on. "Tomorrow mornin' I'm ridin' up to help you with that herd. Yuh ought to have another rider or two."

"I have no money with which to pay riders," the girl said coldly.

Jim nodded thoughtfully. "Uh-huh, I see. Maybe I can find a feller or two who's willin' to work for his keep till the money starts comin' in, but the chances are against it. Well, we'll make out somehow. I got considerable loose time on my hands and I'll do what I can. By the way," he added, "I see you aren't wearin' your gun. You take to wearin' it—wear it

all the time—and keep a rifle in your saddle boot when you ride."

Mickie's lips twisted disdainfully. "Why? Is your boss going to start shooting women as well as old men?"

"Sheriff Cartwright is my boss and he's sick in bed," Jim replied quietly. "But if you're thinkin' of Cliff Horner, I wouldn't be makin' bets. There's somethin' almighty funny goin' on on this range. Looks to me like it's more than just a common water fight. You do as I tell you."

JIM did not know it, but Mickie Carson watched him out of sight as he rode away from the ranchhouse. She was visioning a shadowy hollow beyond a thick grove, and an old man lying on the ground with blood trickling between his ashen lips. And as she looked the grizzled old body changed to one lithe and tall and broad-shouldered. Mickie crushed a tense fist against her trembling lips.

"No! No!" she breathed and rushed out onto the porch, listening, peering with wide, frightened eyes toward the dark hills that walled the ominous hollow.

"He's passed it by now," she whispered. "I mustn't let him ride by there alone again."

As Jim feared, punchers willing to work for their keep were as scarce in Jacinto as any cowboys in Heaven. Those who were not working for Cliff Horner or some of the big spreads to the south had been struck by the gold fever and were in the hills with pick and pan and cradle. Jim finally gave up in disgust.

"Guess me and the little redhead'll have to make out by ourselves," he growled. "Nice of old Tom to give me time off from the office."

Mickie Carson rode in to visit Cooley after she and Jim had had supper together late the following evening. It gave her an excuse not to let him ride alone through the dark hollow that was the gateway to the Bar C range. All along that ominous stretch of trail, where the gloomy hills provided concealment for a dry-gulcher, she rode with her stirrup touching his. Only after the hills had fallen back on either side and the trail again wound across open prairie did she veer away from him. Jim was puzzled, but decided it was best not to ask her questions.

"Thought for a little bit she was sort of comin' down and bein' friendly," he mused. "Guess I was wrong. Chances are she's still figurin' the whole play is just part of Cliff Horner's skulduggery. Gosh, but she must hate me!"

Mickie chattered brightly to old Tim about affairs on the ranch. Tim, forbidden to speak, lay smiling and nodding. Finally Mickie ventured a casual remark.

"That deputy sheriff who brought you here has been helping me with the work," she said, intently watching Cooley's face.

Old Tim's eyes sparkled and he grinned delightedly. It appeared he restrained his desire to speak with the utmost difficulty. He reached out and patted Mickie's hand.

"Fine! Fine!" the gesture said.

Mickie Carson rode back to her ranch in an unquiet frame of mind.

"He never shot Tim, that's certain," she told herself. "Well, I knew he didn't all the time. I was just mad and had to do something mean. Now how am I going to make it up to him?"

Jim arrived at the Bar C ranchhouse early the following morning.

"I'm goin' to take a look at them south hills over toward the waterfall," he told Mickie. "I got a notion they're a nice bunch of fat little dogies holin' up there. The grass ought to be mighty good and they'll be waterholes among the rocks this time of the year. They'll look sort of nice in the corral, don't you think?"

"They sure will," Mickie agreed, and he saw her smile.

"I'm plumb dizzy," he told his black horse a little later. "It was like seein' the sun come out in a rose garden."

BY RIDING hard, Jim combed a herd out of the hills. He drove it slowly past the jumble of canyons and gorges that butted up against the tall cliffs of the waterfall. He pulled up as a figure rode from one of the distant canyons.

"I may run into you some time during the afternoon," Mickie had told him. "I'm going to cut through the north brakes and slant back southwest. I spotted a little herd up there yesterday."

"Guess that's her," Jim said and nodded, "but she didn't locate the herd."

Abruptly he came out of his comfortable slouch and peered intently toward the distant horseman. Another had ridden from the canyon. A third appeared, and a fourth.

"Now what's up?" muttered the cowboy.

On came the horsemen, riding at a swift gallop. Jim saw a sudden little white puff mushroom up. Almost instantly there was a snapping sound in the air close by. To his ears drifted the crack of a distant rifle. Jim swore and whirled his horse.

"Horner's outfit, sure as fate!" he growled. "Get goin', hoss, we got to leave our dogies and hightail for home, if we don't want to make a lot of buzzards and coyotes happy."

Away sped the black horse, and after him thundered the raiders. Bullets were dropping all about the fugitive, kicking up little puffs of dust, splitting the air with spiteful crackles. Jim bent low over his horse's neck and urged him on with voice and hand.

But the black had covered many miles that day and had worked hard rounding up the herd of half-wild cattle. He was doing his best, but the pursuers were gaining. Jim, casting anxious glances over his shoulder, could see that plainly. He began to examine the ground ahead for some gorge or canyon in which he could make a stand. He was slanting north toward broken ground, but the protecting hills were still far off.

"This of all days I would ride without a long gun!" he muttered disgustedly. "My sixes aren't worth much against their rifles. Before they get close enough for me to use my pistols I'll have plenty bullet holes in me."

On roared the black horse, nostrils flaring red, eyes gorged with blood. His breath came in great panting sobs, his shiny black coat was fouled by sweat and flecked white with foam from his champing jaws. Jim helped him with every trick known to the skilled rider. The pursuers still gained. Jim could faintly hear their triumphant shouts.

The black was floundering. A hollow moaning came from his laboring lungs. His haunches seemed to sink. Jim gave a final glance at the distant hills, his mouth set bleakly and he pulled the horse to a staggering halt.

"No use killin' you, too, feller," he gritted as he swung to the ground.

Down swept the pursuers, guns blazing. Both of Jim's sixes were out and streaming fire, but the distance was still too great for anything like accurate pistol shooting. He saw his bullets kicking up dust in front and to the side of the raiders.

"Just another minute and I'll do somethin'," he muttered, shoving in fresh cartridges. "I'll—"

Crash!

Jim felt a giant's hand smash the side of his head. He was whirled off his feet and hurled to the ground. He clutched his guns, straining to raise them. A torrent of blood cascaded into his eyes, blinding him. He dropped one gun and fumbled some of the blood aside. He could hear triumphant yells and the spat of bullets striking nearby. He tried to bring the gun to bear on the compact group surging toward him. A crackling beat of hoofs behind him brought his head around. He saw a horseman, gigantic against the setting sun, bearing down upon him.

"Guess this finishes it!" he panted.

A gun boomed, almost beside him,

but Jim did not feel the tear of the bullet through his body. A shriek of pain lifted in the distance. The nearby gun cracked again and again. Jim clawed the blood out of his eyes and managed to get to his knees. He swayed there.

Scant yards distant, Mickie Carson stood with a rifle resting across her saddle. Jim saw a puff of smoke leap from the muzzle, heard the crash of the report. He also saw the raiders streaming back the way they had come and heard their yells of anger and disappointment. Two of them were swaying drunkenly in their saddles and a third flopped against his horse's neck.

"Sure is plumb fine shootin'," muttered the cowboy and slumped limply to the ground. He dimly sensed that his aching head was pillowed against a softly rounded bosom and that deft hands were wiping the blood from his face.

YOUNG Woodward did not lose consciousness. In a few moments the daze wore off and he sat up. Mickie bound up the slight furrow in his scalp.

"It's next to the one Tim gave you, but not so deep," she told him. "You're getting quite a collection."

"Head's goin' to look like a Chinese alphabet at this rate," growled Jim. "Did them horned toads scatter my dogies bad?"

"Not bad," Mickie replied, "and I've got a herd in a canyon over there. I heard the shooting and thought I'd better investigate. Who was it?"

"Didn't see any of 'em close enough to tell," Jim said, "but I'll bet I can guess in two guesses."

Jim had a villainous headache the next day and was in a vicious temper. Face bleak, eyes cold as green ice, he rode up a well traveled trail to a big gray ranchhouse set in a widely spaced grove. He dismounted among the trees, strode up the veranda steps and through the open door. He found himself in a wide hall.

From a half-closed door a little down the hall came voices. Jim shoved the door open and walked into a spacious room. Two men seated behind a long table looked up in surprise. One was Cliff Horner the other a hard-faced individual with his left arm in a sling. Horner spoke, his voice silkily smooth.

"Well, well! So we got the majesty of the law in our midst."

Jim slowly unpinned the star from his shirt front and slipped it into his pocket.

"Wrong," he drawled. "This is goin' to be a little man-to-man gabfest. Never mind standin' up, Horner. You can talk just as well sitting, and that's all you're goin' to do. Martin, don't let that good hand of yours get restless, if you want to keep it good."

Horner spoke, all the silk gone from his voice, leaving it venomous as a rattler's hiss.

"One yip out of me and my boys will pile in from the bunkhouse and make sausage meat of you."

"Uh-huh," replied Jim grimly. "And when they get in here they won't find nothin' but a couple of corpses."

"What do you want, anyhow?" the taciturn Martin growled.

Jim regarded the pair for a moment. He reached for his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette with his left hand.

"Horner," he said, "if I could prove yuh're back of the things that have been happenin' on the Bar C range of late, I'd pack the two of you to Jacinto and pitch you in the calaboose. But I can't prove it, and sooner or later that's apt to be mighty tough on you. About the next time somethin' funny busts loose I'm goin' to turn my star in to Tom Cartwright and come lookin' for you without any authority except what's hung to my belt. That's what I rode up here to tell you."

"You'll ride some place once too often," Horner snarled.

Jim tried a shrewd shot in the dark.

"I won't be ridin' plumb out of sight, like Mike Carson did," he said.

His keen eyes caught the glances that flickered between Horner and his foreman.

"What are you talkin' about?" blustered Martin.

"Nothin' you don't know about, Martin," Jim replied, adding: "And don't forget, Tim Cooley talked quite a bit before he was plugged, and he'll talk more. *Adios*, gents."

He backed out of the room, with death glaring at him from two pairs of eyes. He wasted no time getting to his horse and riding away from the Tumbling H.

"That poke I took at 'em about Mike Carson sure got 'em swappin' ends," he chuckled, "and they didn't take too kind to what I said about old Tim havin' things to tell me. Well, maybe that little powwow'll give 'em somehin' to think about and stop trouble for a while."

Jim found a job awaiting him when he got back to Jacinto.

"Row over a claim on the creek," Cartwright told him. "Guess you'd better ride over and straighten it out. They'll listen to you, chances are, and mebbe it'll save a shootin'."

Jim mediated the squabble on the creek to the satisfaction of all concerned. He ate a late supper with the miners, who insisted on celebrating the cessation of hostilities with much good food and bad liquor. It was past midnight when he reached Jacinto again.

"Guess I'll slip over to Doc's place and see how Tim is makin' out," he decided, knowing that the wounded puncher spent many sleepless nights.

MOVING softly so as not to awaken Doc Hawkins or One Long Hop, he slipped up the steps and across the porch. He was surprised to find the door standing wide open. Still stepping softly he glided down the hall to Tim's room. The door of that was partially open also. A light burned dimly. Jim slipped into the room, and hurled himself sideways as his eye caught a gleam of steel.

Crash!

A shot boomed deafeningly in the little room. Jim slithered along the wall, his Colt bucking in his hand. The man who had fired at him went down in a blood-smeared huddle. A second man, who had been leaning over Tim Cooley's bed, knife in hand, crashed through the window in a clang-jangle of shivered glass and splintered sashing. Jim leaped toward Cooley's bed.

Kabloom-boom!

Jim heard buckshot screech over his head, felt the hurricane blast of its passing. He whirled, ducking and weaving, guns clicking to full cock. One Long Hop's voice rose in a yipping squall.

"Me blow him out from under top my hat! Me give him both barrels of the triggers! Me go get more cartridges!"

"You keep 'em out of that old basc-burner!" roared Jim. "You wounded three angels that time."

"Me catch 'em on the wing!" chanted Hop. Doc Hawkins rushed bellowing into the room, his wide nightshirt flapping against his legs.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "Don't you drunken ignoramuses know this patient needs rest and quiet?"

Jim was bending over Cooley's bed. "What happened, Tim?" he asked.

COOLEY glanced beseechingly at the doctor. "Go ahead," rumbled Doc, interpreting the look. "It won't kill you to talk a little."

"Was goin' to slit me throat," whispered Cooley. "One was holdin' me down. The other man had towel over me mouth. Jim got here just in time."

"You know 'em?" asked Jim.

"Never saw 'em before."

"That'll do," interrupted Doc. "Shut up, Tim. No more till tomorrow night. I'll look you over, now."

Jim turned the dead man on his

back and peered into his dark face.

"Mexican," he muttered. "Chances are the other one was, too. No chance to find out anythin' about 'em. They just drift in from nowhere and ain't got any past, any relations or any thing. Just the right kind to hire to do a murder. *Mmm!* looks like somebody's darn anxious not to have Tim do any talkin'. I'll sure be sittin' right alongside him tomorrow night."

He helped One Long Hop carry the dead Mexican outside.

"You're coroner, Doc," Jim remarked. "You can do all the inquest that's necessary. I'll stop by and tell Henley, the undertaker. Hop, yuh sit down in Tim's room tonight with your ten-gauge shotgun. If anybody tries to come in, shoot first and ask questions afterward."

"Can do," agreed Hop. "Me pepper um. Salt um, too, bet your hat."

CHAPTER V

Stampede

SNATCHING a few hours of sleep, Jim rode to the Bar C. As he rode up the long slope toward the ranchhouse trail, he saw two figures trudging along ahead of him. As he neared them he recognized the two old pocket miners, Hank and Amos. They greeted him with joyous shouts.

"We took nigh onto seven thousand dollars out of that pocket you saved for us from Horner," gabbled Amos, "and did we have a larrupin' time! Paid up our back grub bills and perceeded to enjoy ourselves. Busted in less than a week, but our credit's good for quite a spell now."

Jim chuckled at this naive confession. Hank sidled up close to him.

"And now we're on the trail of somethin' big," he whispered. "Feller, we're runnin' down the mother lode. Those pockets back there on Horner's land showed there was more gold higher up. We been findin' color all along the line. See them hills up ahead? That's where all this pocket gold must come from. Somewhere up around where that water comes down is where the rich ledge is. We're goin' to find it this time or bust a rib tryin'."

"Chances are you'll bust several if you go foolin' around them cliffs," said the grinning Jim. He was eying the two old prospectors' strong, deeply bowed legs with interest. Jim had an idea.

"You fellers ever do any ridin'?" he asked suddenly.

"Sure," chuckled Amos. "We both used to punch cows back in Oklahomy. We got tired of forty a month and decided to see if we couldn't do better at minin'. That's how we come to be ridin' herd on a pick and shovel."

Jim dismounted and squatted on his heels, rolling a cigarette. The two ex-punchers pulled out smelly pipes and the three enjoyed a smoke. Jim's eyes were calculating.

"You fellers feel I did you a sort of good turn a while back, don't you?" he asked suddenly.

"You sure did," declared old Amos emphatically. "Right now I can feel that danged rope shuttin' off my wind. Feller, any time we can do you a turn, don't stop a minute about askin'."

"And that goes double," echoed Hank.

Jim stood up and grinned at them.

"Well, I'm askin'," he said. "Listen till I give you the lowdown."

He told them of Mickie Carson's predicament and her need of riders who would work for their keep until cattle were sold and money came in.

"Yesterday I learned somethin' more," he concluded. "The Jacinto bank held a mortgage on her place and was due to foreclose next month if she couldn't meet the back interest payments. Cliff Horner bought that mortgage and if that gal don't get her shippin' herd together and to the loadin' pens on time, Horner'll grab off the spread. That's what he's

been workin' toward all the time. So you see you'll be doin' me a favor and tanglin' Cliff Horner's rope at the same time."

Old Amos chuckled creakily. "And that's my idea of a plumb fine time," he chortled. "Feller, you've hired this spread a couple of hands. Me and Hank ain't so fast as we used to be, but we can still fork a bronc and twirl a rope as good as any young squirt who wears fancy pants and a ten-gallon hat. A little chuck and a place to pound our ears is all we hanker for."

With four riders on the job, the Bar C shipping herd grew swiftly. Jim Woodard eyed the bawling corral with satisfaction.

"Two more days and we'll be ready to hit the trail," he told Mickie. "This shipment ought to put you in first class shape."

"It will," she said, "thanks to you. I don't know how I'll repay you."

"We'll talk about that later," Jim said.

FOR some reason, the casual answer made Mickie blush rosily.

"I'll be listening," she flashed over her shoulder as she rode toward the ranchhouse.

Jim went to visit Tim Cooley that night. He found the old puncher sitting up against a nest of pillows.

"Yeah, he can talk a little tonight," said Doc Hawkins. Jim immediately asked a question.

"Tim, what did you hear Cliff Horner and Martin saying that time you started to tell me about?"

"Sure and it was funny," whispered Cooley. "Martin was readin' a letter to Horner. It went somethin' like this:

Gold shipment received. Assayed higher than any in recent months. We are sending, under separate cover, payment in gold coin, as requested.

"It sounded so funny I kept sayin' it over till I wouldn't forgit it," added Tim. "Letter must have been from some smeltin' company. Horner was just sayin', 'And it ain't been touched'—then they heerd me."

Jim was disappointed. "That don't sound like anythin' much," he said. Tim leaned forward and whispered.

"There ain't ever been any gold on Horner's place exceptin' what's in those little pockets, and Horner don't do any pocket minin'. Where's he gettin' gold regular to ship out each month? And why was he and that spalpeen Martin afther bein' ready to shoot me just because I heard 'em gabbin' about it? Faith, and I think it's funny."

Jim couldn't answer Cooley's questions, but they caused him to do some serious thinking.

"Anythin' Horner's mixed up in will bear investigatin'," he told himself with conviction. "Let's see, now, Cartwright said the stage was robbed of gold shipments several times in the past year. And more than one miner's been murdered for his gold. Maybe that's the answer. Nope, that doesn't make good sense. But what does?"

All day long, as he ran strays into the shipping herd corral, he pondered the matter and could make nothing of it.

"I'm sleepin' in the bunkhouse with Amos and Hank tonight," he told Mickie at supper time. Tomorrow, we'll start the herd for the shippin' pens. It's only a couple of days' drive. We'll get there in time."

It was an oppressively hot night. There was a mutter of thunder over the mountain tops. The air was heavy and still. Heat lightning glowed fitfully on the horizon. The herd was nervous and irritable and kept up a continual bawling.

"Mighty glad we fixed that fence good," Jim remarked to Mickie. "The way they're millin', they'd knock it over if it wasn't tight."

As the night wore on the cattle became more and more restless. Jim could not sleep for their racket. Finally he got up and dressed.

"I'm goin' out and ride herd," he told Hank and Amos. "No, there isn't any use for you to come. I can keep 'em quiet."

The black horse came at his whistle and Jim saddled up. He rode slowly toward the corral. The night was thickly dark without a star in sight. Jim hunched sleepily in the saddle.

"E-e-e-yow!"

Crackety-crack-crack! Bang-bang-bang!

Shots, yells, the snap and crackle of swung slickers shivered the air. Long red and gold flashes split the darkness. Jim heard the beat of fast hoofs, then a rumbling thunder that drowned even the bellowing of the terrified cattle. He jerked both guns and began blazing away at the flashes. Bullets whizzed about him as his shots were answered. The black horse scudded forward.

Jim cursed steadily, jamming fresh cartridges into his empty guns. He knew all too well what that ominous rumble was. Once heard, the sound of stampeding cattle is never forgotten.

The yelling and shooting were receding. "They got 'em over the fence, the sidewinders!" Jim swore. "They've sure gone plumb to blazes, now!"

Grimly he tried to overtake the stampeders and wreak vengeance, but they had stopped their noise and the darkness swallowed them up. He rode slowly back to the bunkhouse.

"Can't do anythin' till morning," he told Mickie and the two old punchers, who had been aroused by the uproar. "Then we'll see how much damage is done."

CHAPTER VI

Through the Mist

PLENTY of damage was shown by daylight. The shipping herd was scattered far and wide. It would take days to round it up again.

"Horner took that trick," said Jim bitterly. "Sure, it was his outfit. Who else would cut the fence and run those dogies out the gap? He's made you lose that contract, Mickie, but we'll beat him yet. We'll get the herd together again and I'll find another buyer before next month."

Getting the herd together again was but a matter of time and patience, but finding a buyer was something else again. Horner's hand showed in this, too.

"Looks like he or some of the other big spreads he's got influence with have got agreements with all the buyers in this neck of the woods," Jim admitted. "But I'll tie onto one yet."

As the days passed, however, a feeling of failure began to oppress him.

"I reckon the thing for me to do is ride over to the Tumblin' H and shoot Cliff Horner right now instead of later," he growled to Mickie one evening after a fruitless day.

Mickie clung to his arm and there was terror in her blue eyes.

"Promise me you won't think of it, Jim," she pleaded. "I believe that's just what they expect you to try and are ready and waiting. You'd never again leave there alive. And, Jim, I wish you wouldn't ride toward those awful cliffs like you have been doing lately. That's where my father r-rode the—the last time I saw him!"

Jim patted her sunny hair and his voice was very gentle. "Don't you go worryin' about me, now. I ain't goin' to get into any trouble I can't slide out of. Where's Hank and Amos?"

"They're busy over at the barn, getting their gold digging tools in shape. They've got lots of time on their hands now and they told me they were going to do a little prospecting tomorrow."

"They'll never get over it," Jim chuckled. "If they found the mother lode tomorrow, they'd be off huntin' another one two days later."

He found the two old codgers far up toward the waterfall the following afternoon.

"It's somewhere up in this direction shore as you're a foot high," Hank insisted. "We been findin' color right along. Looks like some other folks has been workin' up this way, too. We found burro tracks comin' acrost them south hills."

"They head up the way we're goin'," added Amos, "but they ain't so fresh. Figure they were made late yesterday evenin'. Uh-huh, you can hit 'em just the other side that manzanita thicket."

Jim searched until he found the burro tracks. He was mildly curious.

"Guess I'm sort of loco," he admitted, "but I get suspicious of anythin' I see on this spread any more. Now who's runnin' burros up here, and why?"

He followed the tracks with little difficulty. Straight toward the frowning cliffs that walled the head of the valley they ran. Jim began to wonder.

"If they don't turn off soon, they won't be any place for 'em to go," he muttered. "A goat couldn't climb those cliffs, in front or on either side."

A low murmur began to pulse all about him. It was the noise of the fall. Louder it grew as he advanced, became a mutter, a rumbling roar. The tracks continued. Jim's eyes were bright with interest. A hundred yards from the base of the cliffs the soil broke up in a jumble of rocks and boulders. Here the trail ended. Jim sat his horse and stared in astonishment.

"Now where'd they go?" he growled. "They couldn't cross the creek—nothin' could swim in there the way it runs—and there ain't a sign of 'em turnin' back. This sure is interestin'."

PATIENTLY he examined every inch of the soil from the side wall of the gorge to the creek bank. The burros had not turned back. They had simply walked up to the cliffs and vanished.

"I know darn well they didn't fall into the creek and drown," Jim declared. "Burros are too all-fired smart to do that, and whoever rode 'em wouldn't drive 'em in, even if they could, that's certain. Besides, there aren't any boot tracks leading away from here. Whoever come up here with 'em is still here, too."

He examined the cliffs for caves, and found none. For several minutes he stood staring at the white and green beauty of the waterfall. He did not venture very near it because of the sheets of spray flinging out in opalescent showers.

"It would be jest like ridin' through a big rain storm," he mused.

He turned and gazed down the valley. The sun was low in the sky. He shaded his eyes to the glare and saw a single horseman riding swiftly toward him.

"Just in case," he murmured as he loosened the rifle in the boot close to his knee. He watched the distant rider grow larger.

"Well, I'll be darned," he exclaimed suddenly and rode down the valley. He had caught a glint of hair that shimmered like burnished gold in the sunlight.

"Mickie, what you doin' up here?" he shouted as they came together.

"Amos told me you were riding this way," said the girl, her blue eyes wide, with a hint of fear in their dark depths. "I'm—I'm afraid for you to be up here, Jim. You—you know what Tim says about the Little People living here!"

Jim chuckled. "Sure, now, you don't believe in such things, do you honey?" he bantered.

"No, I don't guess I do," Mickie admitted, "but just the same I don't like this place. Come on back home with me, Jim. Strange things happen here."

That brought Jim back to the present with a jerk. "They sure do," he said. "Maybe Tim's right about his Little People after all, though I never heard of them grabbin' burros."

He told Mickie about the donkey trail.

"I got a notion they're still around here somewheres, even if I can't find 'em," he concluded. "See that manzanita thicket over there? I'm goin' to hole up there and watch a spell. There's a moon tonight and I heard tell the Little People come out of the ground when the moon's bright. Maybe they'll bring those burros with 'em."

"But what difference does it make if a couple of burros did come up the valley?" protested Mickie.

"I don't know," admitted Jim, "but anythin' out of the ordinary that happens on this spread of late'll bear lookin' into."

"All right," said the girl. "If you're set on staying, I'll stay."

"That'll be nice," Jim said, "but I'm scared you'll get cold and hungry."

"Just the same, I'm staying," replied Mickie in a voice that admitted of no further argument.

They sat in the thicket and talked while the sun sank in a riot of crimson and gold and winy purple. Saffron flame ringed the cliff tops. The tree trunks were tall copper columns with velvety shadows clustering in the leafy groins of their cathedral aisles. The cliff-walled gorge was brooding, ominous. The waterfall was a rushing torrent of blood in the fading light.

DARKNESS fell and the waterfall was a ghostly shimmer. Its growing rumble seemed muffled. And then a great white moon soared up over the cliffs and turned it to liquid silver shot with the shimmerings of fairy wings.

"The fretted fires of Mora
Played o'er him in the dark,"

quoted Jim in a low voice.

"That's bad as Tim's Little People," murmured Mickie. "It—Jim! Look! They're coming right through the falls!"

Jim Woodward felt a prickling of his scalp as shadowy forms walked out of the curtain of mist. They seemed grotesque, gigantic in the ghostly light. Hunched, misshapen, they were creatures from a nightmare. The moonlight fell full upon them and Jim chuckled softly.

"It's the burros," he whispered. "They got packs on their backs and looked all out of shape in the dark. There's a couple of men behind 'em."

"But where'd they come from?" gasped Mickie. "They couldn't live in the water!"

"May the Little People turned 'em loose," chuckled Jim. "Wait till they're outa sight and we'll go see."

The burros and the men, uncertain blurs in the deceptive moonlight, passed down the valley at some distance from the thicket.

"Just a couple of prospectors," Jim reasoned. "We can catch up with 'em before they can get out of the valley, if we want to. First we'll go and see if there isn't a hole that I missed in that cliff."

They waited a little longer and then hurried toward the fall. The two men herding the plodding burros were just reaching the summit of a low hill a mile or so down the valley. One carried his arm in a sling. The other was tall and heavy and broad-shouldered. The first man glanced back toward the waterfall. He halted, turned and peered steadily. His keen eyes had caught a suspicion of shadowy movement.

"Boss," he exclaimed, "hanged if I don't believe there's somebody back there!"

The other man turned and peered also. He, too, caught the shadowy movement.

"Chances are it's just a stray steer," said the crippled man, but with little conviction in his voice. The other man spoke grimly.

"Take the loads on to the house, Sam. I'm goin' to slip back and see if things is all right."

"Hadn't I better go with you?" offered the other.

"You aren't any good with that busted arm," said the big man, "and we don't want to leave these loads around loose. You head for home."

MICKIE and Jim reached the fall and stood staring at the wavering curtain of mist. Jim had a sudden feeling of understanding.

"You wait," he told Mickie, and stepped into the mist. She stepped right after him.

Jim caught his breath as the chill shower drenched him. He groped blindly, slipped on a smooth, wet surface and floundered ahead. The water abruptly stopped beating against his face. He stared about him in astonishment. Mickie, pressing close to him, gave a little gasp.

They stood in a little rocky hollow. All about them the moonlight, silvery-green, seeped through the cloud of mist. To one side was the smooth rush of the fall, and behind the arching torrent loomed a dark opening.

"It's a cave," exclaimed Jim. "See —you can walk right along that ledge and go into it without even gettin' wet. If this doesn't beat all!"

Mickie shuddered against him. "It's terrible looking," she breathed. "It looks like a tomb."

"I'm goin' to see what's in there," declared Jim. "Those prospectors brought somethin' out and, after all, this is your land. Now if I can just keep my matches from gettin' wet."

He carried matches in a waterproof case. He dried his hands as best he could on the inside of his shirt and struck one as they entered the cave. It was a low arch scarce ten feet in width. Jim had to stoop to enter.

"She's plumb dry under foot, anyhow," he said. "What's that shinin' on that rock?"

"Jim, it's a lantern," exclaimed the girl. "It's just been put out," she added as she picked it up. "The globe is still hot."

"Sure, it is—those prospectors were usin' it," Jim explained. "Let's get her lit again. That's better."

With the aid of the lantern the going along the natural tunnel was easy. It twisted about considerably but maintained a fairly uniform width and height. After a hundred yards or so it abruptly widened. The lantern light failed to strike the side wall.

"Careful, now," Jim said. "We don't want to get lost. Keep close to this wall. There, she isn't so wide after all."

Near the side wall he stumbled over something. It was a rusty pick. A couple of shovels and another pick lay nearby. Many fragments of rock were scattered about. Jim picked one up, held the lantern close and peered at its broken surface. He whistled and examined the ragged side wall.

"No wonder Horner wanted to get hold of your ranch, Mickie," he exclaimed. "This is the mother lode Amos and Hank is always spoutin' about! Rich! Why the gold's stuck in this rock like raisins in a cake."

Suddenly he swore under his breath. "That's what that letter old Tim heard Martin readin' was about," he muttered. "Horner's been minin' this gold on the sly for months and shippin' it out. Mickie, those two fellers we saw were Horner and Martin with a couple burro-loads of gold. Here's where we tie up those two gents proper."

"I don't care what you do, just so we get out of this horrible place without anything happening to us," said Mickie. "Jim, it's a tomb!"

"We'll go in just a minute," Jim comforted her. "I want to look it over a bit more."

They moved along the wall and reached another, cutting it at right angles.

"Look out!" Jim exclaimed. "Here's a hole." He held the lantern high and peered down.

IT WAS a shaft with rough, slightly sloping sides. It was not more than a dozen feet across and perhaps twenty in depth. Jim could see something that looked like a bundle of old clothes resting on the bottom. As he gazed, the shapeless bundle took definite form. A sudden grisly premonition sent a creepy chill along his

backbone. He cast an apprehensive glance at the girl.

"Just go and set down on that rock there a minute," he told her. "I want to take a look in this shaft. It doesn't seem hard to get down."

"I wish you wouldn't go down there, Jim," she protested, "but if you must, please hurry."

Jim found the descent even easier than he had expected. The many rough projections formed almost a ladder. He reached the bottom quickly despite the lantern.

"I thought so," he muttered as he knelt beside the bundle.

It was a bundle of old clothes, all right, but inside the bundle was the skeleton of a man. It lay on its face, one bony hand stretched out. A fleshless finger seemed to be pointing. Jim peered closer and saw that the hand gripped a sliver of rock. Beneath the sliver he could make out irregular lines scratched on a smooth surface. He bent lower.

"It's writin', sure as fate," he muttered.

Holding the lantern close he spelled out the words of the message written by a dead hand with its last failing strength:

Cliff Horner shot me for the gold. I was taking a bath in the falls spray and found the cave. Needed money to develop mine. Told Horner. Showed him. Was to be partners. Shot me in back and threw me in hole, the murderer! Hope he hangs. Dying.

Mike Carson.

For long minutes Jim Woodard knelt and stared. "She was right," he muttered at last. "It is a tomb—her own dad's!"

He got to his feet and began climbing out of the shaft. He was almost to the top when a terrified scream shattered the silence:

"Jim! There's something— O-oh!"

Jim covered the remaining distance in a clawing rush. He cleared the top of the shaft with the lantern swinging ahead of him. In the flickering light he saw Cliff Horner leaping toward him, gun streaming fire. He saw Mickie hurl herself right upon that flaming gun. Horner bellowed curses and tried to sweep her aside. She clung to him with frenzied strength, spoiling his aim, hampering him. With a wrenching twist he hurled her from him. The big gun jutted forward. Jim Woodard slammed the muzzle aside as the six blazed. He gripped Horner's wrist with steely fingers and forced it up. A crashing blow in the face sent him reeling backward, but he clung to the wrist and dragged Horner down with him. Over and over they rolled, cursing, gouging, striking.

Horner tried desperately to free his gun hand but could not. He writhed and twisted, dragging the lighter man with him, but he could not escape that iron grip. Suddenly his left hand streaked to his boot and came up with steel shimmering in the light of the smoking lantern.

Jim saw the knife coming. He let go Horner's wrist, jerked up both feet and drove them into Horner's chest. Horner surged back, retching and gasping. He floundered to his feet on the very lip of the shaft. Horner's big gun swept down.

Jim Woodard shot from the hip as he lay on the ground. The long lances of reddish flame gushing from his gun muzzle seemed to center on Horner's chest. He rose on his tiptoes, his gun exploding harmlessly, and with a choking shriek he reeled back and plunged down the shaft. Already a corpse, he thudded dully beside the skeleton of the man he had murdered.

"And that's what I calls bullet justice!" panted Jim.

He got to his feet and stood swaying. Mickie clung to him, sobbing questions.

"Sure, I'm all right," he told her. "Fine as frog hair."

He drew her close in his long arms. "Looks like I'm goin' to marry me a mighty rich and beautiful wife," he chuckled.

"Rich or poor, you're going to marry one, and soon, I'll promise you that!" Mickie told him with red-headed determinedness.

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